



Refractions #2

Refractions #2

The Fifth Edition

Generated August 15, 2004

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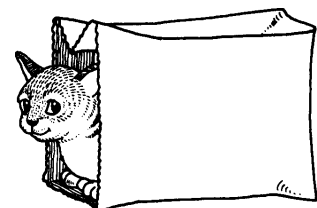
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Cat-Out-Of-The-Bag
Productions

Editorial

Well, here we are again. I can't blame Bryan this time, since Alternity has turned into one of those clubs that never was - or at least, that hasn't happened yet. Refractions is now not affiliated with anyone, but is simply my own brainchild. (mine, mine, all mine! - well it was all mine before, Bryan and I just had a mutual-assistance pact.)

This issue, as I have been telling all and sundry, should be debuting at Parliament of Dreams, Australia's first Babylon 5 convention - which should be fun fun fun (and terribly busy for me!). That's the good news - that there's a fixed deadline, and I think we'll meet it. The bad news is that as a result of this fixed deadline, a few stories (which are not yet finished even now) had to be bumped from this issue to Issue #3. The most disappointing change (from the few comments I have had) is that the next part of *Winning Is The Only Safety* is not in this issue. Next time, I promise! I simply haven't had the time to work on it and get this issue out in time. The up-side of this is that Issue #3 already has a few good things promised for it - if the authors finish them! But don't let that stop you from sending your contributions; as always I am interested in good stuff.

This issue, however, despite the deadline, has a bunch of goodies in it. A mix of stories and poetry, of fun and melancholy, of universes near and far in space and time. The next Inspector Crowley story is here - and folks, even if you haven't seen *Alien Nation*, just check it out as a detective story, okay? Thanks to Sandy Tulloch, we have some action-packed illustrations to go with an action-packed story (I'd almost forgotten how many things get broken or explode in this story). At the completely opposite end of the spectrum, from Marie Logan we see a continuation of the story of *Ladyhawke* - because sometimes happy-ever-after doesn't happen quite that easily. One of my favourites in this Issue is *Irregularity* by Russ Massey - he manages to wed Sapphire & Steel and Blake's 7 so well! So much so that in the midst of much back-and-forth discussions with Russ about the story, I was inspired to write the coda to it.

Oddly enough, this time around, most of the contributors come from the British Isles, with only three from the States, and three from Australia. Gee I love the net!

Do tell me what you think of the zine - else I'll think I'm yelling into an empty room.
Enjoy!

Kathryn

Note On The Third Edition

P.S. This is edition 2.2 the Adobe Acrobat PDF version, whose layout is slightly different to the US edition (Issue 2.1) and the original A4 version (2.0) because that's the way the layout crumbles. The contents are the same, and I'm NOT doing this again! This edition is available in either electronic or printed forms, from me or my agents below. July 1997

Note On The Fourth Edition

Well, despite my vow not to do it again... I've done it again, in aid of me never buying another Microsoft product again, if I can help it. This new revamped version of *Refractions* #2 was done with L^AT_EX and \TeX 2_ε and so it's going to look a little different.

The first edition was done in August 1996.

Word count: approximately 52,700 words.

Refractions #2 (The Fifth Edition) was put together using L^AT_EX, \TeX 2_ε and ancillary scripts for conversions to things like PDF. Story headers were done with GIMP 1.2.3. Prose text was done in Utopia, headers in Dauphin, and other miscellaneous fonts were used also.

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What's In A Word?

(a.k.a. the "Cover your Ass" Story)

By KYMBERLEE

Thank God this meeting is almost over with, Sheridan thought to himself, surprise inspections are a pain in the neck.

"..efficiency rating is good. Could be better, but it's pretty good. Congratulations Captain, I know this isn't the easiest place to be running ...especially with the way interstellar relationships are going right now." General Netter stood up and saluted Sheridan. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm due back on board the Magellan in about fifteen minutes."

Sheridan stood and returned the salute, "Thank you, sir. It's...had it's ups and downs." He smiled a little. "Why don't I walk you to your ship?"

"Thank you, Captain," the General responded as they left Sheridan's office.

Just as they left the office, they heard footsteps running up from behind them. "Captain, I was hoping to find you - do you have a minute? Alone?"

Sheridan sighed, but smiled again, "General Netter, this is Ambassador Delenn of the Minbari Federation. Delenn, this is General Netter of EarthForce."

Delenn bowed to the General and then addressed Sheridan again, "Perhaps later would be more suitable, as soon as you get a minute...?" She bowed again and turned to leave. Sheridan frowned at her.

General Netter sensed the urgency in her tone. "Actually Captain, if you could point me to the nearest 'little officer's room' we can meet at the Magellan's docking bay in fifteen minutes?"

"Of course," Sheridan answered. "Down that hall and it's about the third door on the left." With yet another grin he added, "Be sure to stay clear of the one marked *Pak'Ma'Ra only*."

With the General heading away, Delenn turned back to Sheridan and indicated that they go into his office.

Once they were in and seated he asked her, "Is everything okay?"

Delenn took a deep breath. "I was looking for you earlier. Commander Ivanova said you were in a briefing due to a surprise inspection." She paused, "We have another cargo ship of Narns due to arrive in about two hours. I was concerned about what would happen if one of your superiors would notice several hundred injured Narns disembarking a Minbari freighter on an Earth outpost."

"I see your point. That could get messy." Sheridan's link beeped. "Sheridan, go."

"Captain, General Netter's ship is scheduled to leave in fifteen minutes. Are you going to see him off or would you like me to?" Ivanova asked.

"I already told him I'd be there." Sheridan paused, considering what Delenn had told him. "Do you have a current ETA on that Minbari freighter, Commander?"

There was a slight pause as she checked her board. "Yes sir, one hour eighteen minutes. They've requested immediate docking clearance."

"See that they get it, Sheridan out." He tapped off his link and turned to Delenn. "Well, I guess I should go see the General off the station. If we give them immediate clearance they should be gone before your people bring in the Narns. I'll go and make sure we've covered our ass well enough."

Delenn thought about what he said for a second, trying to keep the confusion off her face. Finally deciding that saying nothing would be best, she stood, bowed and followed him out of the office.

★

Delenn was sitting in front of her data screen when Lennier came in to report that the Narns had been brought on board and taken to Med-lab without incident.

She nodded her thanks and went back to staring at the terminal again. Lennier couldn't help but notice her distraction. He moved around to stand behind her and see what was so fascinating.

The screen was blank.

"May I be of assistance, Delenn?" he asked. It wasn't like her to sit and stare at a blank data screen. Many scholars of the religious caste had spent years upon years trying to come up with perfect meditation shapes. He was sure this wasn't one of them.

"Lennier, do you find humans confusing?"

"Much of the time. They are sometimes a very illogical people... Why?"

"Captain Sheridan told me today that I need to be sure to 'cover my ass'. But according to the computer, an 'ass' is large gray pack animal from Earth." Her frown deepened. "Lennier, I do not have an ass to cover!"

Lennier remained silent, trying to think of a possible explanation. "Perhaps..." he started, knowing that what he was about to say was ridiculous, but since he couldn't think of anything else... "the Captain thinks that sending pack animals to Narn will help them rebuild."

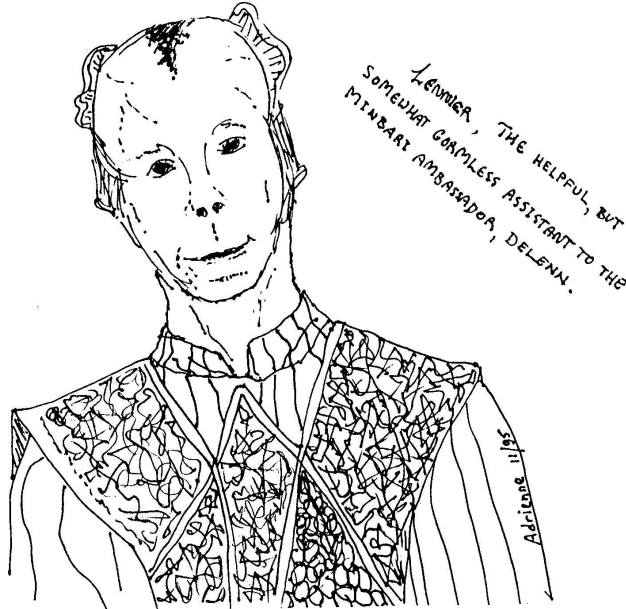
Delenn turned around to face him, and Lennier realized that she thought it was as ridiculous as he did.

"Perhaps if you told me exactly what he said, I could look into it for you," Lennier suggested.

"Yes, yes thank you. That will be very helpful. He said that he needed to be sure that 'we've covered our ass well enough.'"

"I will look into the meaning of such a phrase. Perhaps you should rest. You look... distressed by all of this," Lennier suggested.

"Perhaps I will go for a walk in the garden. Yes, if anyone needs me, that is where I will be." Delenn sighed, wondering why it was that the longer she was around humans the more she failed to understand them.



★

When Delenn entered the garden she found Commander Susan Ivanova sitting on one of the patches of grass. She was poking at a data pad with a stylus, her uniform jacket laid carefully to one side. She didn't seem to be enjoying what she was doing. With a final stab at the pad, she threw it down on the ground, "Oh the hell with them. If they don't like our docking schedules, then they can dock somewhere else! ...Make me a hell of a lot happier. What a pain in the ass." She picked up the pad and started stabbing at it again.

That word again.

Delenn decided that perhaps it would be best to leave her alone. Ivanova seemed at least as frustrated as she herself was feeling. Delenn began to study the patterns made in the sand of the Zen area of the garden. She had let her thoughts turn away from the problem of why sending work animals from Earth to Narn would help when she heard a dull *thud*.

Delenn turned to see Commander Ivanova lying flat on her back, not moving. Fearing that she had passed out, Delenn stood and hurried to her side. "Commander...Commander..." she called out.

Susan sat up before Delenn could reach her. "Huh? Oh, hi Delenn. I didn't see you come in."

"I was afraid...you...fell over..." Delenn sputtered.

"More like just flopped over... I'm just frustrated with the new docking regs. They're really messing up our schedules. I thought maybe if I tried working on them in a less stressful atmosphere than C&C I'd get more done. So much for that theory, huh?" Susan

smiled at the ambassador for a second before looking more serious and asking, "Is something wrong?"

Delenn felt blood rush to her cheeks at the proposition of explaining her dilemma to someone else. Either she'd look the fool for not understanding, or the Captain would look the fool for such an odd suggestion. Ivanova was watching her patiently, waiting for an answer.

"I'm...not sure... Captain Sheridan made a very odd request earlier this afternoon..." Delenn knew that Susan knew she was stalling.

Susan, for her part raised an eyebrow. She was aware of the affections growing between the Captain and the Minbari ambassador. She suddenly wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"We were discussing the Narns that arrived today and we were talking about trying to be sure your General Netter did not find out about them. Susan... what are the station regulations about bringing animals on board?"

Ivanova blinked at the non-sequiter. "Animals? Well, pets must be non-sentient, DNA registered and tagged. They have to be under 20 kilos, or the owner needs to apply for a special permit to have a large animal on board. Owners are responsible for all damage done by a pet. Why are you asking me this? Are you thinking of getting a cat?"

"No, no, Captain Sheridan told me about the havoc that cats can cause... oh, this is very awkward... This afternoon Captain Sheridan asked me to 'cover an ass' - Where would such an animal be kept on a station such as Babylon 5?"

Ivanova never heard the last question. She was, as the expression goes, laughing her ass off.

Delenn stood up, discomfited. it came out as she had expected - badly.

"No, no, no! Delenn, wait. I'm not laughing at you... leave it to the Captain to..." she collapsed into laughter again.

Delenn stood there trying to decide if she should leave.

"Cover your ass is an expression. Actually in this case, 'ass' refers to a part of your anatomy...um..." Susan paused trying to think of a way to explain that without offending the ambassador's delicate sensibilities. "Um...the part of your anatomy that you sit on."

Suddenly Delenn was reminded of another odd conversation in the garden. "Ah yes! Your butt!" she exclaimed, sending Ivanova into another fit of laughter.

"Well, yes, but in this case, what it basically means is that you need to be sure that you've..." Ivanova paused trying to come up with a way of explaining an idiom, without using another idiom, "left no evidence of what you've done. He wanted to be sure that General Netter didn't learn of us smuggling Narns around." An example occurred to her. "We certainly could have done a better job 'covering our asses' when we returned from the White Star."

Delenn could feel her cheeks becoming even hotter, but felt most relieved to understand. "Thank you, for explaining that. I must admit that human language becomes most mysterious when the situation is tense." Bowing, she left.

And almost ran into Lennier who had come to share his findings with her. "Ambassador," Lennier said bowing. "I think I have found the source of the confusion. 'Ass' has two meanings. The first as you found out, is a large terran pack animal, the second -"

" - The second," she interrupted, "Means a part of the anatomy...but even then, it doesn't always. Yes, so I have learned."

As they left the garden Delenn explained in rough form, the conversation she had had with Ivanova.

★

"...So she was trying to find out where we'd be keeping a donkey on the station," Ivanova finished explaining to Garibaldi that night at Earhart's.

Garibaldi almost choked on his water. "She wasn't really?" he asked.

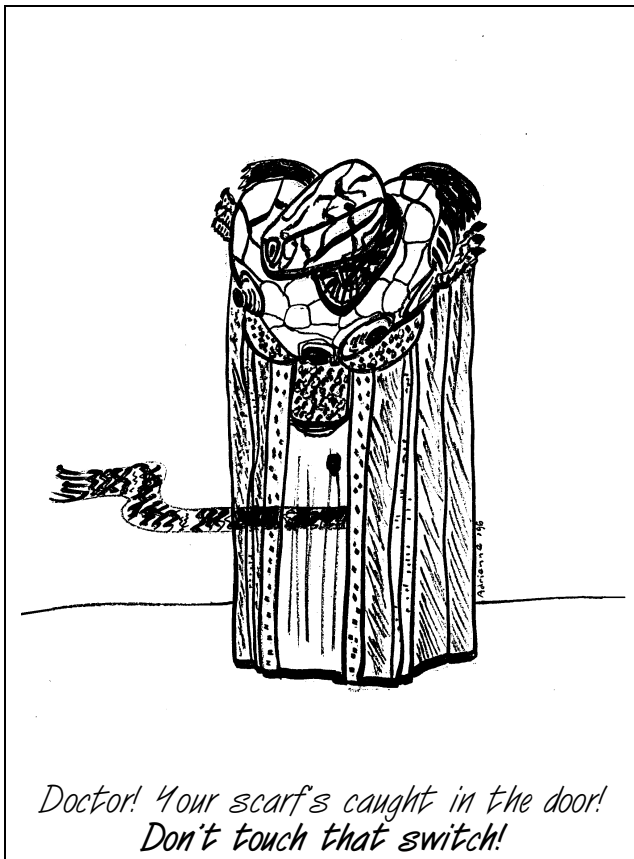
Ivanova spotted the Captain coming towards their table and raised her voice so that he'd be sure to overhear, "Yeah, she really was. Looks like the Captain needs to learn how to phrase things just a little more diplomatically."

Sheridan grabbed an extra chair and sat down. "Mind explaining yourself, Commander?"

"You bet your ass," Garibaldi said, sending both him and Susan into another fit of convulsive laughter.

(This first appeared on the Babylon 5 fiction mailing list <b5-creative@lists.best.com>)

Kosh Encounters (I)



Faith Manages?

"If I do not see you again here, we will meet
again at the end of time, where there are no
shadows"

— Delenn to Sheridan, Confessions & Lamen-
tations

Once, it was easy to believe.

When I thought that you would be the one who
mourned

Easy, to offer you comfort for the pain you felt
Empty words, easy to say

Easy to be the one lost and not the one left
behind

Who is there now to tell me that there is a
future beyond the end of time?

To win a war, there must be sacrifices, you said
We are all volunteers, not victims

I did not try to stop you as you walked in to
the flame

You never turned away from what we both
knew must be done

No goodbyes

One life or a million, it's all the same

But not when the life was yours

And it's lonely, and it's cold here without you.

How long will it be till the end of time?

Wait for me

Goodbye. I love you.

— Alison Hopkins

IRREGULARITY

by RUSS MASSEY

"Jenna, what do you make of this?"

Glad of an opportunity to stretch after four long hours in the pilot's chair, Jenna Stannis stood and moved over to the navigation console, turning her head from side to side to ease the ache. She craned forward to peer over Cally's shoulder at the readouts. "Whatever it is, it's small. We'd never have detected it at more than a few hundred spicals."

"And it seems to be just drifting," Cally said, "I can't pick up power emissions from any type of drive unit."

"Perhaps it's a distress beacon of some kind?" hazarded Jenna. She straightened to address the pattern of ever-changing lights on the port bulkhead, "Zen, give me a visual reference on the object on forward detectors. Maximum magnification."

+CONFIRMED+

The screen projection expanded outward from a central point, until it appeared that the band of close-packed stars through which the *Liberator* flew was near enough to be touched. An object tumbled across the field of view. Its size couldn't be judged, as the void held nothing to compare it with, but it reminded Cally of nothing more than a coffin. She dismissed the thought. Precognition was a rare gift among her people, and usually only experienced near the moment of death.

"I'll bring it aboard," said Jenna, moving purposefully back to the pilot's console.

Cally looked up in surprise. "Shouldn't we let Blake know? Or Avon?"

Jenna snorted, "Blake needs sleep after everything that's happened, and I'm not really interested in hearing Avon's opinion. Depressurise the aft hold! I used to skim pods of contraband out of close orbit for my living a few years ago; let's see how rusty the old skills are."

★

At rest in the cargo bay, the object glistened with ice. Its skin was still as frigid as the cold between stars, and the moisture in *Liberator's* atmosphere had crystallized on it as it thawed. It was a cylinder, about four metres long and two wide. It rested on a flattened section - one of three such areas spaced equally about its circumference. Jenna and Cally examined it closely, checking for markings on the weathered off-white surface.

"I think it's some sort of cargo pod," said Jenna, pointing a powerful torch beam, "and by the look

of all the pitting, it's been floating through space for centuries - maybe longer. Wait! Here's something!"

Cally bent closer to examine faded letters revealed by the light, "E.R.V. Trenton, Museum Exhibit 26," she read aloud. "Terran, anyway. What do the letters stand for?"

"Nothing in current use," said Jenna absently, "so it's definitely pre-Federation. Museum exhibits? I wonder if there could be valuable antiques among them."

Cally hid a grin. The strongroom held more wealth than they were ever likely to need, but it seemed that the acquisitive instincts of humans were not so easily satisfied. She checked the instrument she held. "The scanner says the pod's warm enough to touch." She smiled slightly. "Let's take a look."

Jenna reached for the tools at her belt. Any 'moving' parts that had been in space as long as these were certain to be vacuum-welded immobile. She extended the sonic drill, only then noticing that she had drawn her handgun instead. When had she strapped on the weapon? She couldn't remember doing so. She glanced toward Cally, who now had a weapon in her hand as well. Jenna felt curiously detached. Somehow what she was doing had ceased to be important. Fighting back a growing feeling that this was a dream of some kind, she tried to resheath the weapon. Her arm trembled with effort, but wouldn't obey. She tried to turn her head away from the pod; tried to look toward Cally; tried to say something. Nothing happened. Her body belonged to someone else - someone far, far away.

With a mild hiss, the flat section of the pod which faced them cracked open. Jenna couldn't even blink as the black slit grew slowly wider. And wider still. Impossibly wide, it filled her vision, blocking out first her view of the rest of the hold, then the light of the torches, then even the sight of her own hand. The universe had vanished. There was nothing but darkness.

★

Blake edged carefully onto the flight deck, a plate of food in one hand and two cups of coffee balanced in the other. "Jenna, Cally, I thought you might want a bite to..." He looked up and fell silent as he saw there was no one at the controls. Frowning, he found a space to dump the meal and turned to the computer. "Zen, where is everyone?"

+EVASIVE COURSE, SPEED STANDARD BY TEN, CONFIRMED+

"What! What are you talking about? I didn't order any course change!"

"What is it, Blake?" Jenna entered the flight deck. "End of my watch already?"

He swung around to confront her. "It'd be nice to think you actually spent it watching! What the hell do you think you're doing leaving all stations uncrewed? Pursuit ships could be right on our tail for all we know!"

Jenna slowed and put one hand to her face while she strove to remember, "I ... was helping Cally with something."

Blake, striding angrily about the deck, ignored her words. "It's not good enough, Jenna! I trust you to run the ship. And what's Zen trying to tell me? Have you ordered a course change?"

Before the confused pilot could frame a reply, Avon entered and came to an abrupt halt in the doorway. "Have we stopped to pick up passengers, Blake?"

"What are you talking about? We're still in deep space!" replied Blake, beginning to lose patience.

"Then who," responded Avon, pointing his finger, "is that!"

Vila was next to arrive, and peered cautiously along Avon's arm. Blake and Jenna both turned to look. A figure could be seen standing over the navigation console. It wasn't completely focused, like a poorly maintained holoprojector, but seemed to be a tall, dark-skinned young woman in a close-fitting blue jump-suit. Even as they watched, the apparition gradually faded to nothing.

"Zen," snapped Avon, "was there someone just operating the navigation controls?"

+THE DETECTORS WERE LAST OPERATED BY CALLY, TWELVE POINT SEVEN MINUTES AGO+

"Was she real? Who was she?" asked Vila.

Jenna moved cautiously to the position where the image had stood, and passed her hand through the empty space.

Blake shrugged, "No one I know. Does anyone know if Zen projects holograms?"

"By anyone," said Avon, "I presume you mean me. The answer is yes, but only to certain locations. That is not one of them."

"Could it have been a ghost?" asked Vila. "My grandmother used to tell me about ghosts. She always said a little fear was healthy for a growing lad. Strange woman. I never liked her."

"Believers in the supernatural think that certain things are unknowable. I disagree. Things are only unknown at the moment, never unknowable. Of course..." Avon smiled and turned to face Vila, "if it was a ghost, it does sound as though Vila would be our expert in dealing with it."

"Now, wait a minute..." Vila began.

"Hold it, all of you." Blake moved to switch on the shipwide intercom. "Cally, Gan, report to the flight deck." He moved to stand where the strange woman had been seen, and looked over the detector read-outs before raising his head to sweep his eyes over the crew. "I don't like events I can't explain. Especially when they happen on a ship we still know too

little about. I think we need to find some answers."

★

Several minutes later all six crew members were sat in the central area of the flight deck. Blake summarised events from the moment he had entered.

"Could it be some sort of Federation weapon, Blake?" asked Gan. His hand moved almost of its own accord to touch his scalp.

"What sort of weapon?" pondered Blake. "Something affecting our minds? I doubt the Federation could get to us aboard *Liberator*."

"Agreed," said Avon, staring into space, his fingers steepled. "If the Federation could influence our minds at interstellar ranges they would already rule the galaxy, and we know that they do not. Cally, could it be telepathic in origin - someone calling to us, like the *Lost* did?"

Cally was embarrassed to be reminded of the episode. "Well, I wasn't on the flight deck when it happened, remember. But you don't see mental projections with your eyes; it happens in your mind. I do have a feeling of unease though. As if something's not quite right." Absently her hand dropped to her belt, as if seeking an object that was no longer there.

"So do I!" said Vila, "and I've no mental powers!"

"That's very true," drawled Jenna, with a withering glance in his direction.

"If we can come up with nothing more substantial than 'feelings' and indifferent attempts at humour," said Avon with a sideways glance that took in both Vila and Jenna, "I propose this discussion be ended. We'll learn a lot more from a thorough systems check."

"In your opinion," stated Blake, mildly.

"It's an opinion that should carry more weight than most on matters concerning this ship," replied Avon, with a belligerent stare.

Blake chose to ignore the challenge. "Drugs," he suggested. "Contamination doesn't seem likely to me, but I'll run checks on the stocks of food and drink we've consumed since *Centro*. Jenna, can you give me a hand? Gan, I want you and Vila to search the ship for anything out of the ordinary. Avon and Cally can stay here and run diagnostic checks on all systems. Let's get to it!"

★

A man and a woman stood in the *Liberator*'s teleport bay. They looked around carefully, as though they were new arrivals, though they wore no teleport bracelets.

She was tall and slender. Long blonde hair fell in ringlets reaching half way down her back. Her tunic, skirt and boots were all the same shade of sky-blue. Her eyes were a much darker colour, difficult to pin down. "It's a ship," she said.

Her companion matched her in height, but was more powerfully built. His hair was also fair, but cut severely short in a military style. If her colour was blue then his was grey. It was in the shiny cloth of his high-collared uniform, in the supple leather of his shoes, and in the hard eyes that scanned his surroundings. He glanced down at his clothes and then up at his companion, raising an eyebrow.



She shrugged. "It's not out of period."

"Sailing ship?" he asked.

There was humour in her return glance. "Space ship. And a very advanced one for the period." She reached out to touch the wall. "Built twenty-two years ago."

"What is the period?"

"Oh, Second Calendar. Mid-third century, I think. The Terran Federation's first major expansion."

He grunted. "Not your usual level of precision."

"We're travelling outside the normal axes. Time gets altered. It complicates things." She turned to her grim companion and smiled. "I've never been this far out from the centre before."

He gave her a sour look, and led the way into the corridor. "I have. I had to handle a time break with Ruthenium in this zone."

"Your first partner? I don't think I've ever met her."

"Then you missed your chance. That was her last mission."

★

"What do you say Gan? I mean, we don't know anything about the Liberator before they found it just drifting in space. With no crew aboard. No living crew."

"There were no dead crew either, Vila! There was no one at all on board when Blake took over." Gan finished looking around the teleport chamber and headed for the portside cabins, with Vila trailing behind him.

"Well that's even more suspicious if you ask me. What if the ship was abandoned because it was haunted, eh?" Catching a movement out of the corner of his eye, Vila spun to see a cloaked man pointing some sort of weapon at him. His yelp of fear as he dived to the floor brought Gan back.

"What is it, Vila?" Gan looked all around, trying to find something that could have caused the panic.

Vila opened one eye cautiously, and then climbed shakily to his feet. "I saw someone. A man with a gun. He was firing some sort of gas at me."

Gan looked at him without comment.

"I know! I know there's nothing there now! How come everyone takes Avon's sightings seriously and not mine?"

With a last look around Gan resumed his journey. Vila hurried swiftly to keep up, muttering under his breath.

★

The grey man and the blue woman stood on a gantry, overlooking the vast spherical housing of the Liberator's drive systems. The sound here made

verbal communication impossible. The very air vibrated with power.

Is it this travesty that's responsible? asked the man.

Not entirely.

What's that supposed to mean? Even I can feel it! Time being twisted, stretched... mastered.

The contempt in his mind-voice made her shudder. *It's their key to the galaxy. They don't realise the dangers involved. They don't know what time is.*

And so things go wrong.

Yes, her voice was soft, distant, *things go wrong. What happened to Ruthenium?* At first she thought that Steel wasn't going to answer.

She started thinking too much. It's a distraction.

Thinking about what?

About things that had nothing to do with the job. You do it but you have an excuse - you were human only a few years ago. You'll grow out of it. Ruth was a veteran.

Like you?

Steel grunted audibly, his eyes still scanning the drive chamber. He changed the subject. *So. What's gone wrong here? Why have we been sent?*

Sapphire sighed inwardly. Even after two missions with Steel she knew so little. *I'm not sure. Everything I look at seems blurred somehow; as if several slightly different images are overlaid one on top of the other.* Her hand tensed on the rail of the gantry and she swayed.

Sapphire! His reaction was swift; his grip certain. She was pulled back from the edge.

The age of the ship, Steel! It changed!

Changed? How can it change?

I felt it. One second it was twenty-two years old and the next - it was two hundred days older!

Have we travelled forward?

She concentrated briefly, *No, Just the ship, It's ageing.*

He grunted, *Then we'd better get moving.*

★

Vila followed Gan around the bend leading to their own quarters. He looked over his shoulder for signs they were being followed, and rebounded from Gan's stationary form. The exclamation that came to his lips was choked back as he turned and saw Gan's raised hand. "What is it?" he whispered.

Gan slid back around the corner of the passage, pushing Vila ahead of him. "The door to my room. I just saw it slide shut." He activated the nearby intercom. "Blake, it's Gan. Is there anyone in the crew quarters besides me and Vila?"

"Definitely not. What have you seen?"

"My door closing. I think there's someone in my room."

There was a pause. "I'm on my way. Be careful, Gan."

With a grim expression, Gan began moving cautiously toward his door.

"Shouldn't we wait for Blake?" hissed Vila. "We haven't even got a weapon."

"I don't think you can shoot a ghost," said Gan. Once outside his room he slapped the door release,

springing through the widening gap with a shout intended to surprise any occupant. The noise died as he took in the scene. One hour ago his room had been pale green. There had been a few small landscapes of his homeworld on the wall, a bronze sculpture of a woman on his desk. Now all was changed. The walls were diagonally striped in brown and orange bars. A hologram of a Federation Fast Attack ship banked and spun in the air near the ceiling. His bronze was gone, replaced by sheaves of navigation charts.

"Vila, Look at my room!" At the lack of reply Gan reached back through the door and pulled his companion forward. "Look at it!"

Vila checked the four corners nervously. "You've redecorated I see, It's very nice." He crouched to peer under the bunk. "Very... empty."

"I didn't do this!" Gan threw open the doors of the wardrobe. He pulled out a Federation uniform, one obviously made for a man of considerably lesser bulk. "Even my clothes have gone."

Blake entered, blaster at the ready, and looked curiously around. "What's happened to your room?"

Gan just shrugged, staring at the uniform he held at arm's length, as if to minimise the risk of contamination.

"Do you suppose Zen could have managed this?" said Vila.

Jenna now peered through the door. "If I were Zen I'd be insulted. It takes a human male to be that tasteless."

Vila's indignant reply was interrupted by a shock that flung all four of them to the floor. Cally's voice came over the intercom, "Everyone to the flight deck! We're under attack!"

★

Sapphire turned to her companion, now able to be heard using normal speech. "It's a large vessel, Steel. We aren't getting far just wandering around."

Steel didn't break stride. "We won't get anywhere at all standing still. Can you feel it?"

"The aura of violence?"

"Exactly. This whole ship is designed for war. For killing. It practically resonates with it."

"I've been thinking about that. It doesn't fit. You might get that sort of background impression from something like an ancient battlefield, but this ship simply isn't old enough for that sort of psychic residue to have accumulated."

"Could it happen in a place where time is being manipulated? A by-product of something else?"

"No, I don't think so. Give me a minute for a spot reading."

Steel kept on walking.

"Steel, wait!" Sapphire halted in the featureless corridor, and her companion grudgingly turned back to watch. She reached out. Her eyes began to glow with the colour of her aspect. *It was built, twenty- three years ago. It was built to explore. It's deadly, yes. It has fought. The ship has killed. In self-defence. It's never struck first. There are humans on board. Not the original crew. And they aren't alone, there's something else on board. I can feel it now. It's growing stronger. An older killer. So ancient. Blood*

on flint! Bronze tearing through skin! Bullets shattering bone! Old death and new!

Steel gripped her shoulders and stared into her eyes. "Enough, Sapphire."

The blue gradually faded, and she met his own gaze with a bruised look, "It's so old, Steel. Older than fire. Older than the caves. And it feeds on death."

Steel glanced around. "Ancient death combined with cutting-edge annihilation. In a ship that uses temporal energy as if it's just one more power source. It's a time break, isn't it?" There was no answer. He spun to shout at her, "Isn't it!"

Sapphire nodded mutely. She staggered as the Liberator shook. Steel's position hadn't changed a hair's breadth.

"You say there's a crew on board?"

She nodded again.

"There would be! Lead me to them."

★

Cally was piloting and Avon was hunched over the detector readouts when the rest of the crew made it to the flight deck.

"Zen reports several plasma bolt strikes," said Avon, "but detectors say there's nothing but empty space as far as they can reach."

Blake took command as the others moved to their positions. "Zen! Random evasive course, speed standard by ten."

+EVASIVE COURSE, SPEED STANDARD BY TEN. CONFIRMED+

As a rising hum indicated the increase of engine power Blake stared ahead with dawning comprehension, "Now where have I heard that before?" he muttered darkly.

"Deja vu can be expected when time is out of joint."

All heads spun on hearing the unknown woman's voice. Blake smoothly drew his sidearm and brought it to bear. When he saw that the two intruders were unarmed and apparently unmoved by the threat of his weapon, he allowed it to fall. "Who the hell are you two?"

"And how did you get aboard?" asked Avon.

Sapphire smiled radiantly, walking down the steps to face Blake. "We're just travellers. You seemed to be having trouble, and we're here to help."

"Very reassuring," said Blake sarcastically, "but it doesn't really answer my question."

"And it ignores mine completely," added Avon, not taking his eyes from Steel.

"Who we are," said Steel, "is the least of your worries. Something is happening on this ship that will destroy you all if it isn't stopped."

"I don't like the sound of that," said Vila. "Can you stop it? Whatever 'it' is?"

"Just a minute," interrupted Jenna. "Odd things start to happen on board and then you two conveniently appear from nowhere with an offer of help. Why should we believe you aren't behind all this?"

Steel stared at her without expression, "Why should I care what you believe?"

Sapphire broke the hostile silence. "Please forgive my companion's bluntness. He's experienced



the consequences of failure in a similar situation and it makes him irritable." She took Blake by the arm and led him to the couch. Steel joined her, while Avon pointedly moved to stand in front of the gun rack.

"Avon had a good question," said Jenna. "I'd still like to know how you got on board."

"We were sent," said Steel.

"Sent by who?" asked Cally. "The Federation?"

"Hardly."

"Then who?" Blake was exasperated. "Cryptic guessing games aren't going to get us very far. If the situation is as serious as you claim then you must have some means of proving it. If not, you can understand why we just might be inclined to treat you as hostile! If you want our co-operation you're going to have to trust us."

Steel?

Tell them what you like. It probably won't matter in the end.

"I am Sapphire. He is Steel."

"Steel, eh," mused Blake, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "It's not an uncommon code name among revolutionaries."

Steel grunted derisively as he moved to examine the weapons console. Vila hastily backed out of his way and edged around him to take the seat next to Sapphire.

"We aren't... political," she continued, "We're investigators; scientists in a way. Our job is to guard the timestream from interference that could be damaging to human existence."

"Under whose authority?" cut in Avon.

"We're volunteers."

Steel gave a hollow laugh.

"Most of us, anyway," said Sapphire, with a sharp glance in his direction. "We intervene in human affairs only when absolutely necessary."

"And when is that?" said Blake.

"Whenever irregularities in the timestream become threatening to life."

Vila put his hand on her arm, "Er ... you keep mentioning life. In particular the lack of it. I get the impression that it's our lives under discussion."

Steel turned to him, "Now you're getting the idea."

"I thought I might be."

"And you seem to be implying that you're not human," said Cally.

"Not anymore, no." Sapphire took Vila's hand in her own and smiled at him, *Vila Restal, Part of the Federation's underclass. A thief and a dissembler. Hides his true capabilities.* Steel sensed a flash of humour in her mental voice, *Very human!*

Vila was gazing into Sapphire's eyes with an expression of unobtrusive admiration, "If only all aliens looked like you!"

Blake caught Cally's icy glare from the corner of his eye, and coughed to cover a smile. "So, Sapphire, Steel. I'm Roj Blake." Quickly he introduced the rest of the crew, describing them as a band of fighters against a tyrannical government.

Steel only became interested when Blake went on to relate the unusual events of the last hour. "Where exactly did you see this 'ghost'?"

Jenna indicated the spot in front of the navigation console.

Steel glanced toward Sapphire, and without a word she moved to the same position and began to concentrate. The blue glow that appeared in her eyes was noticed by all the Liberator's crew, though none commented. "Nothing," she said.

"Can you replay the image?" asked Steel, "Take time back?"

"I don't know. It might be too far. I don't think I can."

"Try."

Sapphire took a step backwards and stared into space. Her eyes glowed more strongly than ever. Gan was closest to her. He felt his skin tighten, and the hairs on his arms stand straight up. His head began to pound in time to his heart beat. All the small noises of the flight deck were dulled, as if the air itself were thickening. He wanted to back away, but his legs wouldn't obey him. A shape gradually appeared before the console. More than just a shape, a woman. She bent over the readouts and then straightened and looked over to where Blake was still seated. Her mouth moved, but there was no sound. Suddenly the image was gone. Sapphire swayed and seemed about to fall.

Gan instinctively leapt forward to hold her upright. She held onto him for support, strain evident in her features. "Are you all right?"

Sapphire smiled her thanks and nodded. *Olag Gan. He was a veterinarian on an Earth colony. Steel, he's a killer! The memories have been mostly sealed off. He doesn't remember much about it. There's a device implanted that modifies his behaviour. Keeps him sane. He has less than a year to live.*

He's a potential danger.

Agreed.

"Impressive," said Avon, "but what exactly did it tell us?"

Sapphire turned to meet his icy expression, "You saw a glimpse of the future. That girl will become a

member of the ship's crew."

"And my room..." said Gan, "has that been taken over by another future crew member?"

There was compassion in her face. Gan turned away, unable to meet the eyes of the rest of the crew. They all knew he wasn't likely to have left the Liberator by choice.

Steel broke the moment, speaking briskly. "Some entity has broken through time and is now on board this ship. It's responsible for these sightings of future events. There will be more of them. They'll get longer and more real until there comes a point where reality can no longer tolerate the paradox."

"And then?" Vila spoke, not really sure that he wanted to know the answer.

"It won't get that far. There are others of us to deal with events of that magnitude."

"Then why didn't they send one?" asked Avon.

Steel smiled for the first time. "Consider a patient, infected with some malignant growth. It has to be removed. From the growth's point of view it doesn't matter whether the surgeon uses a scalpel or a neutron blaster."

"It matters to the patient!" said Vila.

"Consider Sapphire and I the scalpels. You wouldn't enjoy meeting the others."

"I'm not sure I'm enjoying meeting these two," muttered Jenna.

"We need to locate the entity," said Sapphire.

Blake took the opportunity to take charge, "Right, I suggest we split into teams. Gan and Vila, you go with Steel and take port side. Avon and Jenna, with Sapphire on the starboard. Cally and I will search forward and then co-ordinate from the flight deck."

As the crew moved toward the exits, Avon took the opportunity to speak quietly to Blake. "I hope you've noticed, two handguns are missing."

"I've noticed," said Blake. "Stay alert."

★

Deep in the hold there was a stirring. Something born long, long ago sensed the nearness of its age-old foes, those who would try to stop its being, whatever face or form they wore. It reacted. It wasn't fear. The entity could feel no fear. But the resonance it drew from artifacts of death took time to build, and the two handguns it had obtained were less than it desired. Soon it would have the power to engulf the whole ship, and then it could feed on death greater than any it had encountered. But for now it must be safe. It must grow in darkness until it had power enough. There was no intelligence in its actions, no reasoned logic to guide what it did. There was only eternal malevolence and a chill, final lust for the annihilation of all. And that would be enough.

★

Blake closed the hatch of Probe Subsystems Room 3 with a sigh, "This is going to take longer than I thought."

Cally called out, through the open doorway of the Auto-Repair chamber opposite, "Did you say something?" She finished her inspection of the machinery spaces and found Blake leaning against the corridor wall, scowling. "Blake?"

"I'm not happy with all of this, Cally. Those two claim to be some sort of trouble-shooters, supposedly acting to save 'humanity' from things that go wrong with time... It all seems just a bit too convenient." He looked up and grinned as he saw dust smudges on Cally's nose and chin.

She rubbed at her face self-consciously. "You'd think that at least auto-repair would be clean." Her hands left even more dirt behind. "Is it possible, do you think? That what they claimed could be happening?"

Blake massaged his neck wearily as he led the way to the next set of rooms. "I just don't know. I've been remembering the early history of the time-distort drive. There were a lot of strange accidents; deaths of scientists, destruction of research stations, prototypes that just went missing. The history books blamed it on sabotage by anti-Expansionist terrorists."

"And you think that it could tie in with what's happening here instead?"

"I don't know Cally!" He glanced at her apologetically, lowering his voice, "I just don't know. Does your telepathy tell you anything about them?"

"Very little I'm afraid. They definitely aren't Auronar; they could possibly be human. I still have that feeling of unease I mentioned earlier, but I can't tell the source. It feels like... I don't know. I was once in a skirmish on Saurian Major. We'd wiped out a Federation patrol, but the two Auronar with me were badly wounded. There was no one else around to help. It feels like it did then. A constant background of mental anguish. Their pain became my pain, but it was far away in the distance." Her eyes unfocused. Her voice was filled with pain. "Rylor's dying, coughing up blood from his broken chest. He wants to be an actor; to make people feel things. Thara's dying, half her face burnt off. She won't let go of my hand; keeps trying to tell me not to worry. The smell. The smell's so bad I want to vomit, but I can't let myself. I'm trying to save them; I'm trying to stop the blood, but I've no drugs, no proper equipment. Two of the enemy are still alive. They scream, over and over. I can't concentrate, they just keep screaming and screaming. I have to shut them up, have to make them quiet so I can think." She shuddered, and Blake put his hand on her shoulder. She raised her eyes to his. They were filled with pain, and fear, and loss. Tears trickled down her cheeks, making streaks in the dirt. Whatever she was now seeing, it wasn't him.

"Cally." He pulled her close as she showed no signs of recognising him. Her entire body was shaking. "Cally! It's over. You're safe. There's no danger. You're with friends." Blake was mystified. She seemed to be reliving the experience in such detail that she was actually back there. He continued to speak softly and gently, making meaningless reassurances, while stroking her hair.

Eventually the trembling ceased.

You can release me now.

Blake cleared his throat, and took a step back. "Are you all right?"

She looked at him bleakly.

"I'm sorry. Stupid question. What happened? Some kind of flashback?"

She shook her head slowly, "More than that, I think."

"Something to do with the 'entity'?"

"Perhaps. It doesn't matter; we still have a job to do." She turned away and pushed the door panel for Probe Subsystems room 6 As Blake moved to check the room opposite he barely sensed a quiet thought. *Thank you.*

★

Avon was trying to gain more information about the problem from Sapphire, but without much success. "Be more specific! If we knew the form and capabilities of this so-called entity our search would be more efficient."

"I'm afraid our work rarely lends itself to neat categorisations," said Sapphire coldly.

"Which roughly translated, means that you don't know what the hell you're looking for either!"

Jenna had noticed that while she and Sapphire were searching the cabins and control rooms, Avon had kept most of his attention on the woman. It was obvious Avon didn't trust either her or Steel, but then that was hardly surprising news. Their claims about time monsters were bizarre enough, but add that to their ability to just appear aboard a ship in distort space and it certainly gave you something to think about. "Sapphire, what are you and Steel?"

"I told you, Investigators."

"No," said Jenna, "I mean what's your relationship to each other?"

Sapphire seemed surprised by the question. "We're partners. In the sense that we work well together. Our abilities are complementary."

"Have you worked together a lot?"

"No, this is only our third mission as a team."

Her tone was not exactly encouraging, but Jenna pressed on regardless. "You mentioned something before about volunteering to do what you do. Steel didn't seem to agree."

Sapphire smiled. "He and I disagree about quite a few things."

Jenna grinned back, flicking her eyes in Avon's direction. "That sounds somehow familiar."

Sapphire halted for a moment, touching the walls of the corridor. Her eyes glowed faintly blue for a few seconds. Jenna watched with a fascination tainted with unease at this display of inhuman ability.

"What exactly did that tell you?" asked Avon.

"That this ship was now apparently built twenty-four years ago. And that the influence of the entity is growing."

"Can you tell the distance and direction? We could get a bearing from different parts of the Liberator and then triangulate its location."

Sapphire shook her head. "It isn't like that. It's not a beacon you can focus on - more like a bank of dark fog coating everything. And I think it knows that Steel and I are here. It's trying to hide until it's too late for us to do anything."

"Meaning it considers the rest of us no threat?" said Avon. Sapphire just smiled.

"I thought you had friends who could destroy it no matter what," said Jenna.

"I wouldn't call them friends exactly," Sapphire shivered a little, and wrapped her arms around herself. "I saw one of them once. From a distance ... There's a rule, you see. The trans-Uranics can't be committed if their presence would destroy life."

"But Steel said that he would call for them, and we're still here," said Jenna.

Sapphire just glanced at her, and turned the bend in the corridor without answering.

Avon looked stonily at Jenna. "I imagine Steel is quite capable of making sure no rules are broken." He checked the play of the handgun in its holster and followed.

Jenna's attention was caught by a discoloration on the wall, far above head height. Some sort of mildew? She shrugged and walked after Avon. It could hardly be as important as finding Sapphire's entity.

★

"That's the force wall generator room checked out. There's just hold number three at the end of this corridor." Gan closed the doors and led the way along the corridor to the turning ahead.

"So, Steel. Can you see into the future then?" Vila asked the grim man by his side.

"No."

"Oh. Does it pay well, this job of yours?"

Steel simply glanced contemptuously at Vila and kept on walking after Gan.

"Not enough obviously. Still, you do get to work with pretty women." Vila almost stumbled as the ship seemed to blur about him.

"That's the force wall generator room checked out. There's just hold number three at the end of this corridor." Gan closed the doors and led the way along the corridor to the turning ahead.

"So, Steel. Can you see into the future then?" Vila asked the grim man by his side.

"No."

"Oh. Does it pay well, this job of yours?"

Steel glanced contemptuously down at Vila. He seemed about to say something for a moment then shook his head, as if bothered by an insect, and kept on walking after Gan.

"Not enough obviously. Still, you do get to work with pretty women." Vila almost stumbled as the ship seemed to blur about him.

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"So, Steel. Can you see into the future then?" Vila asked the grim man by his side.

"No."

"Oh. Does it pay well, this job of yours?"

Steel stopped, looking around as if confused.

"What's wrong?" Vila looked around nervously, but could see nothing threatening.

"Gan. Stop!"

The barked command brought Gan around, "What is it?"

"Something isn't right here. Walk forward, very slowly." Steel concentrated his senses, willing them to resist any deception. When he reached a certain

point in the corridor he saw a flicker of darkness, a shifting of the images around him. The trio stood once again outside the door of the generator room.

"That's the force wall generator..." Gan trailed off to silence as Steel raised his hand.

"We've been through this already."

"We have?" asked Vila in surprise.

"Take my word for it."

"What do you mean? We've only just finished searching the room." Gan was puzzled.

"I mean," said Steel, "that every time we walk down that corridor we end up back outside this door. It's a time loop. Quite a good one in fact. Whatever's responsible is probably somewhere on the other side of it. Hold number three you said?"

"This is the only linking corridor. Can you get past it?" asked Vila.

"One learns by doing," Steel said grimly.

★

Avon had been listening with fascination as Jenna had skillfully drawn out more of Sapphire's history while they searched. He wasn't sure yet how much of it he believed, but the idea that ordinary humans could be granted such abilities had he had already seen was a sobering one. The unnamed organisation backing the pair had to be powerful. Powerful enough to laugh at Federation bounties. But the price might not be worth it. Certainly the occupational hazards of such a profession were enough to give one second thoughts.

Sapphire abruptly halted, ending his train of thought. "Steel's found something. How do we get to the force wall generator room from here?"

Avon raised an eyebrow at the evidence of the link between the pair.

"Which one?" asked Jenna.

Sapphire thought for a moment, "The one nearest hold three."

"This way."

★

Cally was at the pilot's console and Blake was pacing the flight deck when Vila burst in. "Blake! Cally! Steel says the thing we're looking for is in the aft-hold. He's trying to find a way to get through to it."

"Right! We need to leave someone on the bridge. Cally, I'll go join them." Blake raced off, relieved to have something concrete to do.

Cally paused for a moment, frowning, "The aft hold... What was I doing in the aft hold earlier?" she whispered.

"I'll stay on the flight deck with you," said Vila, nervously moving closer to Cally's position. She raised an eyebrow and stared at him "Well, I mean to say," he continued, "you might need some protection from whatever it is. And what's happening to the ship anyway? There were lumps of green goo covering the walls on the way here..."

★

Blake encountered Avon's team as he ran, and with handguns at the ready they turned the corner

leading to the hold. The normally unchanging temperature of the Liberator's corridors seemed to drop sharply. Blake could see Steel standing in the middle of the corridor, arms outstretched, one hand pressed against each of the walls. The surface around his fingers glittered with ice crystals. Gan was watching from close by, and his breath steamed as it left his mouth.

"What's he doing?" Avon asked.

Sapphire's attention was fixed on her partner. "He's trying to stabilise the time loop. Extreme low temperatures could do it."

Even as she spoke the air in the corridor began to sparkle darkly. As the patches of ice spread outwards from Steel's fingertips, a complex web of glittering strands gradually materialised in front of him. It almost hurt to look directly at them. The eye wandered along their coils and whorls until it met impossible geometries, and the mind recoiled before the impossible. Steel was not finding the task easy. The strain was all too evident in his features.

Gan threw a small object past him and into the black tangle. As it approached it seemed to slow in mid-air, then come to a complete stop, hanging as if suspended by invisible strings. Blake recognised it in a brief moment of stasis, before it began to flicker as though lit by a stroboscopic light: the cartridge from a vid unit. Then it was gone completely.

A clatter from behind caused them all to spin. The cartridge bounced off the floor in front of the force wall generator room door.

Sapphire turned back to Steel. "You can't do it Steel! It's too strong."

"Must ... try," was his reply, through gritted teeth.

Blake clenched his fists in frustration. He hated seeing someone making extreme efforts on his behalf when there was nothing that he could do to help. Avon slipped away from the group of observers, unnoticed by any of them.

★

Back on the flight deck Cally and Vila were staring in dismay at the shambles that surrounded them. All the ship's surfaces were bubbling and oozing as if in a furnace. Brown slime dripped down from the walls, and globs of sickly jelly pulsed from cracks in the consoles.

"Zen!" Cally called out, "are the auto-repair circuits operating?"

+THIS IS NOT... AUTO-REPAIR SYSTEMS ARE ... SITUATION IS...+ the voice trailed off into silence, and Zen's lights flickered off.

"Well he's a lot of use," muttered Vila. "I think we'd better let Blake know about this." He reached gingerly for the intercom switch, trying to avoid contact with any of the disturbing material on the panel's surface. There was no response.

"It's affected the internal communication net," Cally confirmed. "You'll have to go and find him."

Vila's expression of horror was almost comical. "I'm not making my way through a ship full of this! Can't you use telepathy?"

Cally frowned, but then gave a short nod. With one hand to her temple she focused her mind and reached out for the familiar trace that was Blake. It

felt harder than usual. Distance was normally not something that she was particularly aware of, but Blake now felt very far away. Not in space, or he would have been out of range completely - just distant in a way that she had never experienced before. She spoke aloud at the same time as her mind cast her thoughts outward, the one helping to reinforce the other. *Blake! Hear me. The ship is decaying. Systems are failing. We may not have much time.* She repeated the message twice more, but couldn't be sure that he had heard. The effort had drained her far more than it should have.

★

Avon returned, pushing a pallet on which was loaded a massive section of the main drive unit. Thick cables trailed behind him. He saw that Steel seemed to have abandoned his attempt to break the loop, and was now lent stiffly against one of the corridor walls, a thin coating of rime clinging to the exposed skin of his face and hands. Even from five metres away Avon could feel the waves of cold emanating from him. Steel's eyes were closed. His chest neither rose nor fell. Sapphire had draped one of the thermal coveralls around him and was watching him carefully, perhaps speaking to him through the telepathy they apparently shared.

"What the hell have you got there?" asked Blake.

"The Liberator's drive destabilises normal space-time, correct?"

"Yes, so..?"

"So, if I can generate a local reversal of that effect and focus it on the instability that creates the time loop..."

Blake rubbed his neck, deep in thought, "It sounds like pure guesswork to me. Any one of a dozen things might happen."

"Does that mean that you have a better idea?"

Blake shrugged. "No."

"Then you can have the pleasure of saying 'I told you so' if my idea fails. I need someone at the auxiliary engineering panel to control the power flow."

Jenna nodded. "I'll go." She caught the teleport bracelet that Avon threw to her. "Why this?"

"Intraship communications look to be out," he answered, handing bracelets Blake and Gan also. "Now move!"

Jenna ran off.

"Gan, can you handle this module? It will need to be raised so the field coil is midway between all the corridor's surfaces, and we don't have a dolly that high."

Gan eyed the metal cylinder carefully. "I can lift it," he said with confidence.

★

Steel? Can you hear me, Steel? For several minutes there had been no reply. Her partner had refused to give up, had pushed himself beyond even his prodigious limits. Finally he'd staggered back against the wall and the dark web had faded back into invisibility. Since then he'd shown no signs of life. Sapphire was shaking with the cold, even from being within a metre of him. Shaking with more than just the cold. She had never really faced the



possibility of extinction before. She knew of it intellectually of course; knew the risks involved in every mission she undertook. But this was different - this was her partner dying before her eyes, a mission teetering on the brink of disaster, a choice to be made that she didn't know she would be strong enough to make.

Ruth ...?

His thought was so faint she almost missed it. *Steel! It's me, it's Sapphire.*

Saph ... Sapphire? Yes. So. Far. Below.

You'll be all right, Steel. Come up slowly. I'll be here.

Yes. Slowly.

Sapphire sighed with relief, composing her face carefully before she turned to check on what the humans were doing. The man called Gan had a large cylinder of complex machinery balanced on one shoulder and was making his way, step by careful step, along the corridor. Now almost half way to the airlock connecting the corridor to the cargo bay, he was flickering in and out of sight in the same way the object thrown earlier had. He seemed to be wading through twisted ribbons of yellow-green and sparkling black. The dark strands coiled from the roof, the floor and the walls to wrap around him. They were a different manifestation of the 'loop' that Steel had struggled to subdue. The other tendrils whirled outwards from the maw of the object he

carried. They spun off in vortices of colour which chopped through the darker lines, causing them to shrivel, shrink, and dissipate. The clash of temporal forces made it hard to see the man at their centre, but to Sapphire's eyes it was apparent that Gan was fast approaching his limits. Sweat dripped steadily from him, and his face was contorted in a rictus that spoke clearly of the agony coursing through his powerful frame.

Blake smashed his fist into the wall. "The fool! I should never have let him do it."

Avon glanced at him with a raised eyebrow, "Don't be stupid, Blake! Do you think you could have made it half as far?" He raised his bracelet. "Jenna, give me the full output of bank four. Now!"

Gan screamed, and his body seemed almost to flow like liquid as the emanations from the drive unit reached their peak. As the trio watched, the flickering in the corridor slowed, then slowed still more. The tendrils of black began to fade away, finally vanishing altogether. Gan slumped to the floor, the massive cylinder crashing with him to roll heavily against the wall.

"That's done it! Jenna, shut down all drive systems!"

Sapphire moved cautiously toward the prone figure, which stirred feebly. She bent to examine him. "He lives. It seems the loop has been destroyed. How remarkable. The loop was only a minor manifestation though." She looked toward the airlock. "The real enemy is in there."

Blake straightened suddenly, and drew Avon's curious glance. "It's Cally. She's saying something about ship damage. I can't quite make her out."

Sapphire looked up in surprise. "A telepath?"

Blake nodded, "Cally's Auronar. Many of them have telepathy."

Sapphire pulled Gan up on unsteady feet. "A telepath. And you said nothing!"

Blake stared at her in surprise. "Is it important?" The withering glance he received was reply enough.

Sapphire held Gan steady and stared into his eyes. "Can you take me to the flight deck?" Gan nodded numbly. Supported by the slender woman he staggered away.

Jenna passed the pair as she rejoined Blake and Avon, panting from her run. "Is Gan all right?"

"It seems so." Blake drew his handgun and turned toward the hold. "Are we ready to continue?"

Avon drew and moved to Blake's right. Jenna exhaled heavily and moved to his left. Together they approached the internal airlock.

★

Hearing footsteps, Vila turned to see Sapphire enter the bridge, still helping Gan to support himself.

"Is Gan badly hurt?" called Cally.

"I think he's just exhausted," she replied. "He must have absorbed a lot of drive radiation in neutralising the time loop, and it seems to have been too much for him. The corridor is stabilised now." She and Vila carried Gan to the couch and laid him on it. Sapphire then approached Cally, reaching out to

grasp the surprised woman's hand. "It's true! You are a telepath."

"Yes... But I am limited to projecting my thoughts to humans. I can receive only the thoughts of my own people, the Auronar."

You can hear my thoughts. With your help, and that of Vila, we can make a difference to this fight. Will you let me into your mind, Cally of Auron?

★

The inner door of the airlock opened at Blake's touch, and he cautiously led the way into the hold. The huge chamber arched high overhead, and each footfall echoed in the hollow vastness. The only thing in the hold was a white container, nearly the height of a man and five times as long. One of its six long sides was raised open, but the interior was in shadow and nothing of the contents could be seen.

Jenna shook her head. She had the strangest feeling that she'd seen the object before.

"It's a cargo container," said Avon, "and it couldn't have got here on its own. But is this responsible for what's happening to the ship?"

"There's only one way to find out," answered Blake, walking forward. The look Avon gave him was troubled, but both he and Jenna followed Blake deeper into the hold. As they neared the container they could begin to make out some of what it held. None of the objects appeared threatening in themselves, but each of the trio could feel something oppressive, as if a low roof was forcing them to crouch as they advanced. There were ancient blades within the pod; weapons so rusted and fractured that even to lift one would be to destroy it. Beside them were fragments of armour; tattered scraps of leather, sections of metal links, solid plates of metal. The closer they approached the more certain became the sensation of something evil, something wrong connected with the pod. Finally they could all see two very familiar objects, half-concealed amid the antiques.

"The missing handguns! How did they get into this pod? This has to be it," said Blake through gritted teeth. "This is what's destroying my ship."

"I agree," confirmed Avon, "there's definitely something malevolent in there. But can it be destroyed?"

"Let's find out," said Blake, raising his weapon to fire.

— DISCONTINUITY —

He was in a forest, both like and yet unlike Earth. Jenna was close by, bound with ropes and guarded by some stony-faced woman in Federation black. A mutoid by the look of her. His chest heaved with the effort of drawing breath. Adrenaline surged through his body. His old enemy stood just a few metres away, Blake raised his spear just in time, parrying Travis' thrust and spinning with the reaction to hit him a glancing blow with the butt as his enemy sped past. The Space Commander rolled out of reach and quickly returned to his feet.

"Nice try Blake," he sneered, "but if the only way I can get off this grave-world is by killing you, then you're as

good as dead!" Travis sprang forward, spear lancing towards Blake's chest, while he flung a handful of dirt into the rebel's face...

★

Avon glanced sideways at Blake, wondering why he had failed to shoot. Blake's eyes were flickering from side to side and beads of sweat had sprung out from his forehead. His hand was trembling on the grip of the blaster. "Blake ..?" Avon began, and then realised what must have happened. He jumped forward to get a clear view of the white cargo pod and bought up his own weapon.

—DISCONTINUITY—

The gun in his hand was small, but it would do the job. The shuttle's cargo deck was empty, there was Vila? Not the airlock, that would be suicide. He paced quietly forward, one careful step at a time. In less than a minute he would effectively be dead. They would both be dead unless Vila could be made to see the logic of the situation. A gun could be wonderfully enlightening. "Vila, Where are you Vila? I've found a way to save the ship, but I need your help..."

★

Jenna watched in disbelief as she first saw Blake crouch and spin around the hold, and then Avon begin to slowly pace back and forth seemingly searching for something. Both of them appeared entranced - their minds no longer dealing with what was real. She realised that in each case it had happened when they pointed their handguns at the container. Some sort of defensive system? She sheathed her gun. Maybe it only reacted to advanced weaponry. A distant shriek told her that the *Liberator* was in trouble. Every spacer knew the sounds of hull rupture, and Jenna could also feel a new vibration in the deck plates that told of structural failure. Somehow this thing was killing her ship. Purposefully she advanced on the container. There was faded lettering on the surface of the pod, but even without looking she knew what it said. She reached out to grasp the rim of the open door so that she could lean into the interior for a better look.

—DISCONTINUITY—

Her hands closed on the arms that were throttling the life from her. She could feel muscles like steel cables. Her own strength was useless against them. With blurry eyes she could see Gan's face twisted into a murderous rage. She put all her waning energy into a punch that should have doubled up any normal man, but Gan didn't even seem to notice. With consciousness gradually slipping from her she only had the time to wonder - "Why?"

★

Sapphire, Cally and Vila stood in a circle on the *Liberator's* flight deck, holding hands. Around them the ship was disintegrating; consoles melted into

surreal shapes by the attack of the plague fungus. Gan was laid on the couch, still only half-conscious.

Trust me, Cally, said Sapphire, through the mind-link that she created, What neither of us could do alone, we can do together. In this circle our minds are one. Now reach out; see if you can make contact with your friends. You know their thoughts. You can find them.

No! I can't see them. Cally's head flicked back and forth as she struggled. *There is a darkness of the mind that presses in on us. Something watches from the darkness. I hear it laughing. I feel its hate. It knows we can't succeed!*

Sapphire's eyes began to shine, a pure blue light that forced Vila to look away.

Wait... thought Cally, There are paler shadows in the blackness now. Yes! I can sense Avon. I'm calling to him, but he cannot hear me. Something's wrong. I can see into his mind, but it's so very far away. How can this be?

I'm helping you, Cally. Through me, Vila can lend his strength to help you. Keep fighting. Go further.

*Avon isn't on the *Liberator*. He's on a tiny craft. Searching for someone. He is very afraid. Where is he? What is happening? He wants to kill, but also he is afraid to kill.*

Sapphire caught a glimpse of what Avon was experiencing and recognised the threat. *Leave him now, Cally. He has been taken to another time, and there's nothing you can do to help him. You have to find the Darkness. It's the Darkness that has Avon's mind. You must find the source of the Darkness and confront it to free your friends.*

Cally fought against her instinct to hold tight to her unity with Avon's mind, a familiar anchor in the otherwise featureless void. It wasn't easy to return from so far, but she focused on Vila. His mind was a beacon of hope and fear, shining a pale blue inside Sapphire's protective embrace, a flickering candle of mortality in the endless dark. Struggling against mental tides that tried to sweep her across aeons, past strange worlds and through spirals of stars, she stretched out and clung to the blue. She was deeply frightened. Her telepathy had always been a source of strength and comfort to her, but now she was facing something that used her strength against her, made it a flaw to torture her with. She perceived her tormentor more clearly now. In trying to trap her it had revealed itself. It wasn't in any place she could detect, but she knew it. *It is cold. It hurts to even sense it. It's so ancient. It means to kill. Not just us. Everything! Sapphire, it hurts so much!*

A chill ran through Sapphire. She knew the enemy at last. It couldn't be allowed to destroy this ship or the power it would gain would be too much - it would expand to engulf entire clusters of worlds, perhaps the whole galaxy. If they could achieve nothing in the next few minutes she would have to make the Call. Better that the rules be bent than to risk the alternative. *I can take some of your pain Cally. I can share it among all of us. This Darkness has broken through to your time because of your ship. It doesn't belong here. You can make it retreat.*

Vila's thoughts joined in. *I'm with you, Cally. Don't give in to it. You can take anything from me*



you need.

Cally felt a reassuring strength flood her psyche, restoring her ebbing faith that the Darkness could be fought. She gathered the combined life energies with a skill she hardly knew she had, hurling them against the soulless entity in the black, countering its raging bloodlust with her own compassion, backed by Vila's desperate determination to survive and guided by Sapphire's knowledge and experience. *I think it is working! I can feel its confusion.*

★

In the corridor leading to the hold, Steel sensed the spillover from the massive psychic struggle. A moment of concentration told him that the entity was far from defeated, but the attack had weakened it; had distracted it a little. He would do what he could. His nature did not permit otherwise. He flexed stiff limbs, discarding the insulating layer of clothing that had been draped over him, sending shards of ice tinkling to the deck. His long stride crushed them underfoot, taking him swiftly to the open airlock doors through which Blake, Avon and Jenna had gone.

★

Its hate is so strong! I can't push it back any more, I just can't do it.

Don't give up now, Cally! thought Sapphire, *We can do it!*

What if we can't? came Vila's reply. As the strength of the mental gestalt began to ebb each

of the three could feel the black, flailing menace of the entity begin to recover, regaining its strength. A freezing, paralysing numbness began to creep along the pathways linking their minds.

Sapphire knew this was the moment. She drew on what remained of her reserves and began building a glyph in her mind: a vast golden sphere surrounded by a hundred orbiting flecks of coloured light. Her concentration began to fail as the energy drained from her. The glyph dimmed and wavered. Too late. She had left it too late. The glyph broke apart, the motes of colour drifting haphazardly away until they flickered into darkness...

So cold, came the faint, final thought from Cally.

Sapphire? came a tentative query from Vila. *Should we break contact now?* Cally? Vila could sense a massive threat poised to strike against them. Somehow he knew that the entity was preparing the killing strike, and the others seemed unable to act. As the lethal stab of darkness rushed in on them, his mind screamed with the terror of approaching extinction and hurled itself away, seeking escape; hoping above all else to live. The mindlink shattered and the three minds flew apart, allowing the hammer blow against them to fall on mere emptiness.

★

Steel stepped into the hold and took in the situation at a glance. Blake was moving in slow motion around the white object, which now pulsed with a dark radiance that showed Jenna collapsed nearby. Avon was closer to the airlock, eyes un-

focused, his head swinging from side to side as if searching. Steel strode towards the pod, his eyes boring into the shadowy interior. He moved in a manner that brooked no interference, a living juggernaut; slow but irresistible. Even so, as the entity turned its attention upon this new foe he found his pace began to slacken. The very air around him seemed to thicken, and his advance became measured in yards, then feet, finally only in inches. The space between Steel and the pod seethed with energies, and to halt this approaching nemesis the entity was finally forced to relax its grip elsewhere.

Blake dropped into a crouch, gasping, "Travis ... what?" as he gazed around the hold, stunned by the transition from past to present. Where was Travis?

Jenna groggily got to her knees rubbing at her throat and gasping for air. She stared uncomprehendingly at the blazing light surrounding the man in the hold. What was happening? Slowly she began to remember. Much too slowly.

Only Avon reacted instantly as reality returned. He spun and leapt for the airlock leading to the corridor from which he'd entered the hold, slamming his fist on the close-and-lock. Too much weight. He was a dead man unless he could get rid of the extra weight. As the door slid shut he felt a terrible hammering at the fringes his mind. Something was trying to stop him. Ignore it. Can't afford to think. Just act. One hand pressed to still the agony in his temple, he wrenched open the emergency panel and punched the button labelled 'DEPRESSURISE HOLD'. From the other side of the lock he could hear a low hiss become a mighty roar. The ship trembled as the cargo doors opened, allowing the huge volume of air in the hold to rush out into the vacuum of space, sweeping all contents with it.

Avon lent against the airlock for support, panting as if he'd run a great race. The pressure on his mind gradually diminished and faded, long before the pain that etched his features did. He knew now where he was. He knew now what he had just done. It may even have been the right thing to do, though that was not why he had done it.

He raised his hand to rub his face, and noticed the teleport bracelet on his arm. Realisation dawned. One chance, one slim chance...

"Cally! Vila!" he called through the bracelet. "Get down to the teleport at once!" Then he remembered they probably didn't have bracelets on. He ran. He ran as if chased by demons, as if running from an unnamed dread to a distant haven. He ran to the teleport section, for a single chance at life.

★

Cally pulled herself painfully upright and looked around. The bridge now appeared completely normal, with no sign of the strange rot that had been destroying it. The other two participants in the mental union were still sprawled on the deck near Gan, but both seemed to be breathing normally. A small snore drifted upwards from Vila.

Sapphire stirred, and opened her eyes. They were brown. *You did well. All of you,* came her thought. And then she turned away as her mind reached out in search of her partner and she realised the price paid for victory.

Cally smiled and set about waking Vila.

Avon's breathless voice came over the intercom. "Cally! Vila! I need you down in teleport! Medical emergency!"

★

Cally walked onto the flight-deck where the others were waiting. "It looks like they were teleported just in time," she said. "Blake and Jenna are still unconscious, but it looks like they'll pull through. Gan's keeping an eye on them." She looked searchingly at Avon. "How did this happen, Avon?"

Avon ignored the question, tapping commands on his flight console.

+STATUS CHECK COMPLETE. ALL SYSTEMS FULLY FUNCTIONAL+

"Come on, Avon," Vila pressed him, "what happened with the thing in the hold?"

Avon turned to stare directly at him. "It was playing with our minds, filling them with violent fantasies. Something weakened it, and I was able to break free of the control. I opened the hold to vacuum and ejected the pod into space. The Liberator now appears to be safe."

"And you left Blake and Jenna to be ejected with it!?" Vila exclaimed, staring.

Avon met his eyes without flinching. "They were both in the hold. There was no other way." He turned away.

Cally followed Avon and spun him around to face her. "How is it that you were the one who managed to get to the airlock controls when everything returned to normal?"

His eyes were hooded. "Let's just say that I was already half prepared for the eventuality. The entity had awakened my instinct for self-preservation." He continued in the same flat tone, "You should check the sensors. We need to know where that thing is."

Silently and stiffly Cally walked over to the required console, her back a study in reproach. She bent over the screen. "I've got something," she said with surprise. "Two objects, drifting..."

"Two readings?" asked Avon, glancing at Sapphire, who had been completely silent up till now.

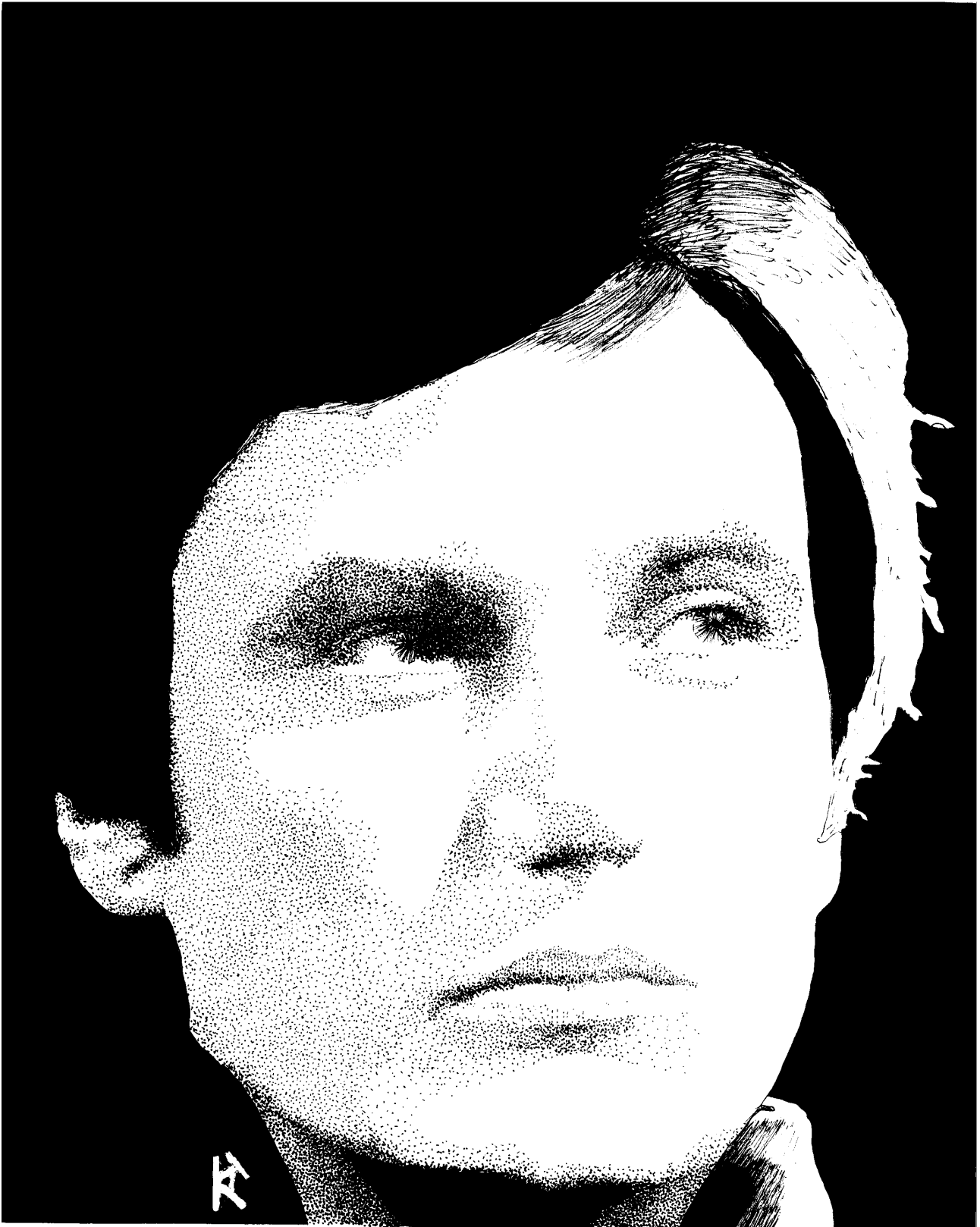
"It was Steel who forced the entity to drop its control." He could see tears trickling down her cheeks. "He wanted me to agree to summon the Others, and I couldn't do it. Maybe I could have saved him." Vila put one hand on her shoulder, but his eyes never wavered from watching Avon. "He's dead."

"Are you sure?" Vila asked, trying to be comforting. "I mean, he could go so cold, surely a little vacuum wouldn't hurt him?"

"I'm sure," Sapphire declared. "We aren't immortal. Just not quite human." She looked up at Avon. "Sometimes the price is too high, but it must be paid anyway." I understand, her eyes said to him. I forgive you.

"Your mission would now seem to be over," said Avon quickly, uncomfortable with her gaze.

Sapphire nodded. "The entity still exists, and it could threaten another ship, but now we know its exact location someone can be sent to destroy it. It would be best for you to avoid this area of space for



the next year." Sapphire hesitated, "Without your help the end result could have been much worse." She paused, lost in thought.

"I'm sorry about Steel," Vila said sympathetically.

"He will be replaced," Sapphire said, staring at Avon. "There is always a need for Steel."

"I don't think the job description is very attractive," Avon commented, trying to rebuff her pointed glance.

Sapphire smiled. "I think you might change your mind - when the time is right."

"When the time is right?" Avon echoed.

Sapphire stared through him, nodding. "About four years," she declared, half-smiling. Her eyes flicked over to Cally. "Or three, perhaps." Her porcelain-perfect features hid her thoughts completely. "It's all a matter of time," she said.

Coda

A matter of time, she said.
Indeed, it laid its toll on me.
This camel's back was broken
Though I cannot count
which one was the last straw.
They all came on at once.
She came to me at night
All blue.
Another madman's vision to converse with.
It was a change from the ghosts.
She offered, I answered, I could not refuse.
So much for volunteers;
Desperation is all the fuel they need.
Who would say no
when there's nothing to lose?
Nothing but one's humanity.
They took me then, and shredded me
and built me up again,
Took me as a core to forge their blade upon.
Molten and tempered, elemental.
Say goodbye to Avon,
Say goodbye to past,
Say goodbye to vengeance and to love.
There's nothing left.
Nothing but Steel.

— Kathryn Andersen

Resolution

Don't tell me it's impossible -
I will ignore you.
Don't tell me I'm crazy -
I could agree with you.
Don't tell me I live -
My complacency died
When they butchered my friends.
Giving up does not exist.
Despair is not in my vocabulary,
Turning back is inconcievable -
This course is set.
I will tread it all the way
I will tread it all the way
and I will tread it all the way
I will tread it.
Whenever I waver
I see their dead faces
accusing me
my dead past
crying Vengeance!
Justice! Liberty!
I will be as ruthless as they
faceless butchers.
This course is set
I will tread it all the way
Back to Earth, all the way.





Don't tell me it's impossible -
 I would have told myself first.
 Don't tell me I'm crazy -
 I would ignore you.
 Don't tell me I live -
 My complacency died
 when she twisted the knife on my folly,
 when that madman called me caring,
 when I learned his death.
 I will prove them wrong:
 Logic before hope,
 Necessity not emotion,
 Success instead of failure.
 I shall not fail,
 unless failure be fated
 and reason cannot counter treachery.
 This course is set
 Nothing shall turn me from it.
 I will tread it all the way
 I will tread it all the way
 and I will tread it all the way
 I will tread it.
 If ever I waver -
 I will not waver.
 My twin goals call me:
 to see her face in the dust,
 to show myself better than him.
 I will be more ruthless than they.
 This course is set
 I will tread it all the way
 Federation, fear that day.

— Kathryn Andersen

on the way to the midnight sun

by Marie Logan

The fenland was disturbed.

*Dark the way, dark the wood,
darker still the sky...*

It echoed across the black, melancholy marsh: the sound and the song and the wild, brave music. Strange foreign cadences bobbed on the air - courtly and heroic music from pale-blooded France, dance tunes from the warm, distant Italies and far exotic Spain.

*A single light shall show the way
to where my true love lies*

A wavering circle of pale yellow light was reflected on the murky waters. At the edge of the marsh a thin column of smoke rose, wraith-grey against the dark sky. A tiny fire burned languidly in the centre of a chance-met group of travellers.

Beyond the listening ring, a mist waited, white as silk, silent as a shroud, to challenge the small golden fire for possession of the silence. The whiteness brooded heavily by the water's rim, watching the flames. There amongst the reeds, wild molten shapes writhed and flickered as the firelight strewed leaping shadows onto the black, turgid waters. A sliver of moon, low in the south-western sky, thrust shafts of silver light past the mist-veil, but clouds came scudding to obscure its forlorn face. Even the stars, pale with autumn solitude, winked bleakly.

The music finished.

The mist settled in the silence.

The minstrel raised an undeterred eyebrow at the quiet. "Aha!" he announced, wagging his finger cheerfully at his unmoving companions, then running his hand lightly across the courses of his lute, "I perceive I have fallen in with a band of philistines!"

He waited, then sighed with resignation. Arrogant the French when they want to be, he thought. And he had chosen his tune deliberately to appeal to his aristocratic audience - it had been a teasing little ballad from Provence, and was a favourite in half the courts of Europe. He had played the same piece only last week to the Emperor Rudolf and had been more than adequately recompensed for his effort. But this evening not a single copper had been flung his way, not even a solitary clap of applause.

The red-haired minstrel looked over his court with an experienced eye. There was the long-nosed cleric, face bent over his books, who lifted his eyes occasionally to stare, in withdrawn intensity, at the distant stars. Then back to his books and his scrawlings on thick paper.

There was... oh, he could hardly keep his eyes from drifting to her... there was the woman. She reclined on the far side of the fire, and her sad, porcelain-perfect face was incomparably fair. Her

face, her figure, her gentle manners would be a dazzling constellation in even the court of Venice where beauty was as common as dust. A fine wool hood fell over her ivory-smooth brow, and her cloak lay negligently over her silken gown, folding onto her daughter's lap. The daughter was a thin, consumptive child, her skin the dead-white of advanced sickness. A lonely, deep mystery seemed to cling to the woman as she arranged her mantle over her daughter's shoulders.

Then there was the husband. He was hunched, scowling into the distance, between the daughter and the long-nosed cleric. A gruff man, he was attired in unrelieved black, with a sword as long as a staff. The minstrel was afraid of him, afraid of his glittering blue eyes with their depths of cold obsession, afraid of his harsh face with its pinched look of long hunger, afraid of the mouth that never smiled. The blond hair and alpine eyes proclaimed him a Teutonic knight, but the minstrel recognised the husband's accent at once as pure French. From the south, the Pyrenees, if the daughter's unusual name were anything to go by.

The woman never once during the evening looked at her husband, though his eyes had a frequent habit of straying in her direction, his expression unreadable. The minstrel too found his eyes being drawn constantly and irresistibly back to her face, and a thought, a question, began to haunt him. Here was, by any sighted man's reckoning, the loveliest woman in all Europe - what was she doing here in the fenlands of Bohemia contemplating a dying fire?

Another question rose. How could he enchant this bewitching siren to his side and wreath her mouth in smiles? "What song would you favour, Lady?" he ventured with a roguish twinkle.

The woman turned to her daughter. "What would you like to hear, Valasquita?" she asked.

The girl gave a throaty cough. "The White King's Ride," she managed.

"Too sad a lay for one so young," returned the minstrel, smiling at the mother.

A growl emanated from her husband's feet. "Quiet!" commanded the knight with a snap, and the wolfcub curled against his boots fell silent. But it sat up on its small black haunches to view the minstrel with bared teeth.

"'Tis a pretty tune," said the girl quietly to the wolfcub, her thin lank hair tumbling over her face.

Her words were followed by a racking cough, and she fell back heavily against her mother. The wolfcub, slumping into the hollow of the knight's boots, ceased its small fierce grimace, but never

shifted its slitted gaze from the minstrel.



Surprisingly the cleric looked up from his books briefly. "Sing 'Moon of the Hawk,'" he said, as he put down his quill.

"Ahh!" breathed the minstrel. "A wondrous tale! But I had not thought it had reached this part of the world yet."

The cleric looked up. "It is well-known in the court of Prague," he offered.

The minstrel began to pluck lightly on his lute strings. "With your permission," he said to the girl. The song was a poignant one, ever bringing a tear to the eyes of the ladies, for it was a romance, with elements of tragedy, but with a sweet ending.

The girl coughed again. "Is it sad?" she asked the minstrel.

"Not this," answered the minstrel. "A most magical lover's tale. A song of hope for all trapped in impossible tangles. But best of all, a true story." He smiled winningly.

The girl returned the smile shyly. She bent down to the wolfcub at her father's feet. "Listen to this, scoundrel!" she admonished the tiny beast. "A happy ending!"

The minstrel nodded vigorously in assent, and drew his hand across the rosewood fretwork of the lute. Then gently, he plucked the first few mournful notes. *I am Sorrow*, he sang, and he heard a sudden gasp from the beautiful woman. He looked up for a moment, without pausing, and watched a shudder shake her body. She stared at him, her eyes strangely resonant with pain. His face fell instantly to his strings, but he went on singing.

*I am Sorrow,
wings misting in the dawn,
golden eye against a fledge of sky;
pinioned in this form I die...*
The wolfcub snarled.
...again each morn.

*I curse the hour we met, but yet,
I would not trade
these broken days
for all of heaven
unless when I am free...*

The wolfcub's snarl deepened to a persistent growl. The minstrel sang on.

*...the Sun is high in a magic sky
and Love,
you stand by me.*

The minstrel dared a brief, upward glance. A wild, trapped horror showed on the woman's face and the sickly girl was trembling with distress as she watched her mother. A cold and savage tension marked the black knight. There was an ominous second of quiet, before the minstrel embarked upon the second verse, comforting himself with the thought that minstrels were often pounded with rotten fruit for their efforts, but never murdered. So, even as he observed the knight's taut, frozen face, the minstrel did not hesitate.

I am Sorrow...

The wolfcub growled in its throat. Attack was written in its stance.

I am Sorrow

Companion to the Moon...

The wolfcub leapt, snarling, a bolt of black fury. The sickly girl burst into hysterical, passionate screaming, punctuated by violent coughing. The lute spun out of the minstrel's hands, flying across the fire as the wolfcub set upon the redhead with its vicious little jaws, snapping down upon the minstrel's playing hand with a hunting growl.

But the black knight had gone to the daughter. "Valasquita!" he was urging. "Hush!"

The minstrel tried to shake the wolfcub off, and looking up, saw that the man's attention was not for his animal and no word of command was likely to be given the beast to desist.

"Valasquita!" breathed the man again and the word was almost a croon. She was cradled in the knight's arms and he rocked her like a small child. "Hush, my love, my darling. Hush my little one."

The minstrel picked the wolfcub up by the neck and bit it on the haunch. For a moment the slitted yellow eyes seemed startled, then it leapt at the minstrel with demon ferocity. The minstrel fought back, but the nuisance was shredding his jacket, tearing at his flesh. "Get this hell-beast off me!" he yelled at the knight, "or I shall batter its brains out!"

The lighting look he encountered from the black knight stopped him. "Your own brains will be mush," thundered the knight like a poisoned oaken spear, "before you are half-finished."

The cleric picked up the minstrel's lute from the edge of the fire.

"Let go of the hand!" ordered the knight. The wolfcub, with a snarl, obeyed, and trotted back meekly to its master.

The minstrel gasped with relief and, trembling with delayed shock, went down to the water's edge to wash his bloodied hand. The black knight simply rocked the weeping girl in his arms. After a little while, her sobbing stopped, and the man rose, saying gently, "I will fetch your blankets for you."

The wolfcub scrambled from beneath his feet, gave a snarl in the minstrel's direction, then padded after the knight.

The man had only gone a few paces towards his wife's litter, when the woman, wan as a statue, turned immeasurably sad eyes to watch him. Pain was etched in that look - pain and a hopeless yearning.

"Etienne," she called softly.

The man spun at the sound of her voice. It was the first word she had spoken to him all evening. "Yes?" he inquired.

"Would you bring the litter to the fire? And kindle it higher? Valasquita should be warm tonight..." The man said nothing in reply - but his eyes and those of the woman were held in some unfathomable bond. The wolfcub had set itself on his left boot, and it was tilting its tiny head back and forward as if in puzzlement. At last the man turned away and strode over to the litter. His wife did not observe him kick it viciously, before dragging it closer to the firelight and the dying warmth. The wolfcub followed, like a shadow, and as he passed his tethered horse, he drew a riding blanket from the saddle and threw it on to the litter.

The minstrel returned to the fire and retrieved his precious lute from the cleric. He examined it, finding only a few scratches on the woodgrain. He pulled a piece of linen from his bag and dabbed at the still-seeping blood on his hand. It looked worse than it was - he knew that. The tiny teeth had been sharp, but they had not penetrated very deeply.

The knight placed the litter close to the fire, and stooping he picked up the frail girl, and carried her to the bed. He pulled the blankets carefully over her, then caressed her brow lightly. "Go to sleep, little one," he whispered. "God will grant you honeyed dreams."

Without a word, the woman went round to the far side of the litter, slipped in beside her daughter, and pulled down the thick drapes against the night. The knight stayed a moment, staring at the closed curtains, then whirling, he went slowly back to his horse.

The cleric tossed a branch onto the fire, then retreated to the mossy verge of a tree.

The minstrel began plucking on his lute delicately and idly, anxious that his damaged hand not stiffen, and that real harm come to his playing fingers. Barely audible, he sang,

*"I am Sorrow, I am Sorrow,
Companion to the Moon,
My only light the stars at night -
they witness my half-doom,
My plight. The shadow of my wolf is nigh..."*

The dagger whistled so close to the minstrel's ear that he dropped the lute, shaking, to his knees. A black shadow loomed like some sudden demonic apparition. The grim black knight towered over the minstrel. "If ever," the man spat, "if ever you sing that tragedy again, my blade will not miss. It will find the space between your eyes."

"Trag - tragedy?" spluttered the minstrel. "'Moon of the Hawk' is no tragedy." He was shaking. "It has a happy ending."

The wolfcub howled suddenly.

"There are no happy endings," said the black knight coldly. He turned abruptly, walked round the fire, and came at last to his horse. The wolfcub met him, and, jaws high, padded in his wake.

The cleric watched him speechlessly, the minstrel in faint-hearted terror.

But the man merely listened for a moment, and hearing no sound come from the litter by the fire, he lay down on the hard earth, and pulled his cloak over his face.

The wolfcub crawled into his arms, and together they fell asleep.

★

"Be careful, Phillippe!" The subdued whisper of male voices, a distant splash of water, a crack of tumbling wood-ash as fire licked at a dry branch: all isolated sounds filtering into the minstrel's waking thoughts.

He had been dreaming of a woman - a woman more lovely than the moon, a supple sensuous goddess with pool-deep eyes and hair streaming in silver threads to the stars. She glided down to him, on a pale moonbeam, but as he reached out to her, she, like quicksilver, ran away like startled fawn. He pursued her into the fenland, and...

The minstrel's nose tickled. He sniffed, huddled into his patched woolen cloak more closely and opened one wary eye. A white diaphanous mist swirled before his sleepy gaze. He closed the eye.

There was a thunderous splash not far away, an odd bubbling and gurgling, followed by choked spluttering, a crash of papery reeds and several indefinable tearing noises. "How many times have I told you to be careful, Phillippe?" It was the unmistakable voice of the black knight, but the tone was strangely full of scolding affection.

"But I got it, father!" A child's voice. A boy. Odd, thought the minstrel sleepily. I don't remember any boy.

"So you did!" The black knight sounded approving. A long pause followed, broken by a number of peculiar thuds. "Got it..."

The minstrel opened one eye again, and saw a small boy by the edge of the water, dripping wet. He was triumphantly holding a huge, squirming eel.

"Phillippe!" It was the voice of the beautiful woman - it was also the voice of a shocked mother.

"You're wet!" The minstrel watched the woman emerge from the litter like Venus awakening on the shore, then she glided into the mist, and down to the marsh's edge. A shapeless dark mass was clinging to her shoulder.

"How could you, Etienne?" she asked, apparently annoyed. "He'll have a chill by nightfall."

The man was sour in his reply. "The boy's come to no harm," he stated flatly.

"I only wanted to catch breakfast for Valasquita!" offered the boy, eyes wide and appealing. He displayed the eel for his mother's benefit. She wrinkled her nose, but looped her hand into her husband's arm. "Will you break your fast this morning with us?" she asked him quietly.

He looked into her eyes. "I have made a vow," he said simply, his tone one of chiding reminder. But a

thin smile was on his mouth, and he touched his lips to hers fleetingly.

"Come on Valasquita!" said the boy, and he reached up to the huddled mass on his mother's shoulder, and something squeaked onto his hand. The minstrel peered closely, and rose to observe the peaceful domestic scene.

A tiny bedraggled hawk was sitting on the boy's wrist: its thin, sickly feathers poking awkwardly from its wings. The boy touched the bird's beak softly in faint pecking motions and grinned, "I hope you like roasted eel, little sister, because it's all we've got!"

He went towards the fire, but before he was half-way there, there was a crashing sound in the marshes behind him, and a loud complaining voice: "Is there no end to this infernal bog? Lord, for what am I being punished? This track of endless murk must be the borderlands of purgatory, Lord, but..."

"Uncle Phillippe!" squealed the boy in excitement, jumping up with delight. "Uncle!"

"Hark, Lord, is that an angel I hear?" There was another crash in the reeds. A splash and... "No, it's but a demon sent to lure me to destruction in this trackless waste. I could be going round and round in circles, Lord, but do you..."

"Over here, Uncle Phillippe !!" shouted the boy. "We're over here!"

"A ministering angel, no less, sent to guide me with my sainted nephew's voice..." Another crash.

The black knight rolled his eyes heavenwards. "Phillippe," he bellowed. "You are not about to enter your eternal reward... more's the pity," he added under his breath. "Cease talking to yourself and get over here!"

"Aye, aye, Captain!" returned the owner of the voice, emerging at last from behind some far bulrushes. "I've traversed half of Germany to find you, you know..."

The boy ran and took a flying leap, flinging himself into the newcomer's arms. The newcomer turned a happy face on the black knight and the woman, bundling the boy forward and giving his mother a light kiss on the cheek. "I had despaired of finding you, Isabeau," he smiled. Then he ruffled the thin ruffled feathers under the hawk's neck. "And how are we, little Valasquita?" he asked. "No better, it seems," he answered himself sombrelly.

"What are you doing here?" asked the boy joyfully. He turned to his father. "I told you we must be much nearer the river than you thought, father," he went on happily.

The newcomer looked over the boy's head and met his father's eyes questioningly. "It's a long way still to the river Oder," he said, and he bent down to tap the boy on the shoulder. "I expected you two weeks ago," he said with a wink, "so I thought I'd better come back and find out what was taking you so long." His eyes met the black knight's again.

The minstrel stared. It was at least ten days journey east to the Oder, and who would want to go there anyway? A primitive desolate region.

"Phillippe," the mother suggested to the boy, "why don't you roast your eel?" The boy scampered off with the hawk on his shoulder, and the couple

were alone with the newcomer. Only the minstrel looked on with any interest - the cleric was just now rising for the morning.

There was an urgency in the newcomer's voice now as he spoke. "I have found out many things," he said rapidly, and for the first time, the minstrel was conscious of the fact that only French was spoken by everyone this strange morning. "Good things." The man paused. "And bad."

The black knight seemed to be carved in stone as he waited. "The river," went on the newcomer, "does indeed go to the northern sea. But the sea freezes in winter. No one can cross it then."

"But there are ships that know the way north?" the woman asked urgently.

"Yes," the newcomer admitted. He turned to the black knight. "But, Navarre," he revealed, "we cannot reach the northern sea before winter..."

The black knight turned away. "I know," he whispered, despairingly, and walked to the water's edge.

The minstrel stood transfixed. Isabeau? Navarre? Sure not... it could not be possible... but...

He made his way cautiously round the fire where the boy was preparing his eels and came up closely to the newcomer. "You are Phillippe the Mouse?" he asked, awe-struck.

"The very same," said the slight man with a quick bow. "I'm honoured to make your acquaintance... err..."

"Karl of Amsterdam, but more recently of Prague," smiled the minstrel and stared. What a story to tell when he reached Linz - if anyone would believe it!

"My Lady Isabeau," he went on with an enormous flourishing bow, "forgive my intrusion last eve. Had I known, had I even guessed you were Ladyhawke, I would have cut my tongue out before singing that song."

Isabeau of Anjou smiled sadly. "You are forgiven," she acknowledged, inclining her head. The unearthly radiance of her beauty evoked wild devotion in the minstrel's heart. He wanted to wipe away her sorrow, sweep its unknowns into an abyss.

Then he stared, as knowledge flooded to him. He whirled to find the wolfcub, knowing, and knowing with appalling certainty, there would be no wolfcub to see. And no pale and sickly Valasquita reclining in the curtained litter. "But why?" the minstrel asked. "How could this have happened? The curse was broken!"

Isabeau looked at him with infinitely weary eyes. "And so we thought," she replied evenly. "But we did not know the nature of the curse the Bishop of Aquila had bought from the powers of darkness."

She closed her eyes, and pressed her fine tapering hands together in grief. "Too late we learned how the demons laughed when Navarre killed the Bishop - for therein, our children's doom was sealed. They cannot face the Bishop as we did and undo the evil done to them. The Bishop no longer lives." Her hands suddenly became white fists, her eyes flicked open. "Never did we suspect that the curse lingered on until the midwife screamed as I brought my children into the world. A girl-child and a wolfcub."

Tears shimmered in the corners of her eyes now, but they did not fall. "Navarre and I can have no more children."

Her hands rose up to cover her face. When she composed herself, the cleric had joined the minstrel and stood calm. "Aspects of your story have always interested me," stated the cleric, blinking his dark eyes. "Tell me, Lady Isabeau," he asked, "why have you come to Bohemia?"

It was Phillippe the Mouse who answered. "There was a man came to Aquila, late in the winter of the year gone. He spoke of a magic land, far, far to the north, where the sun shines at midnight."

The cleric looked thoughtful.

"...and," continued Phillippe, "there is everlasting snow in this land where the sun shines at midnight. The man said he had been there, and the way was easy enough to find - go north and north and ever north. Navarre pressed him for the route he had followed, and he said that, if one were mad enough, one would travel east to the river Oder, then follow it to the northern sea, take sail north, traverse the endless forest until the fields of everlasting snow began. This was the border of the land of the midnight sun. And in this magic place, we hoped to break the curse."

"How?" asked the cleric bluntly.

The Mouse shrugged. "Navarre believed the answer would come to him at the time. Yet, in all the years we've waited for a sign, this was all we heard. For a curse half-broken by a day without a night and a night without a day, a land where the sun shines a midnight seems the right kind of magic to reverse the evil."

Isabeau trembled. "If it can be." She sighed. "I believe that Navarre does not hope any more."

The Mouse caught her hand and stared at her. "Navarre will never give up," he asserted with confidence.

She shook her head. "You have not seen him these past weeks, Phillippe," she said brokenly, "his quiet desperation. I think he has given up. He has made a vow, but what it is, he keeps secret from me. He has fasted for nearly a week, and he will not tell me why..."

Phillippe grinned suddenly. "It looks like I turned up just in time," he smirked. "What he needs is a good shake. His brains are curdling."

There was a hail from the fire. "Meat and bread to break your fast!" called the boy. "Come on!" He beckoned his mother over to the centre of the encampment.

"I," said the Mouse, looking around and noticing that Navarre had disappeared, "will go and find the elusive Captain, and..." He raised his eyes and palms to heaven in an attitude of prayer. "...if necessary, I shall force-feed him like a weaned child." He smiled. "And if he resists, I shall spank him."

He strode off in the direction Navarre had gone, and Isabeau and the minstrel and cleric returned to the fire. "Forgive my curiosity," muttered the cleric, as they sat down by the fire, "but tell me of this night without a day and day without a night. How does it appear?" Isabeau watched her son's unusually dainty fingers attempting to press tit-bits of eel

at the tiny hawk. She understood Navarre's despair: Valasquita would probably not survive the winter. If they could not reach the magic northern land before the northern sea froze over, it would be too late for Valasquita, the beloved of her father.

Isabeau turned courteously to the cleric. "A strange shadow covered the sun," she answered.

"A cloud?" asked the cleric.

"No," said Isabeau, absently reaching for the bread. She tore a piece off. "It was like a dark circle covering the sun."

"Ah," said the cleric thoughtfully. "What time of the month was it?"

Isabeau thought briefly. She could remember the day well, but before she answered the cleric corrected himself, "Not the date," he said. "The phase of the moon."

Isabeau smiled thinly. That was easy. The moon had been her only companion for so long, she had no trouble recalling its phase. "It would have been a night of no moon," she said.

The cleric smiled. "Of course," he nodded to himself. "As I suspected. An eclipse."

"A what?" asked the minstrel and the boy together.

The cleric was beginning to repeat his words when a scream came out of the marsh. "Help!" It was the Mouse bawling. "Isabeau! Help!" The woman ran, fleet as a deer, towards the voice. The minstrel and the boy sped after her.

The Mouse, wet and filthy, was sitting astride Navarre's back and thumping him passionately.

"Phillippe!?" Isabeau's gentle voice was full of uneasy query.

Water, dark and tepid, was streaming out of Navarre's slack mouth at every thump of Phillippe's.

"My God!" Isabeau was horrified. "What has happened?"

The Mouse, seeing his name-sake hurrying up with the minstrel, said nothing. His eyes were all the message Isabeau needed. "He's not dead?" she asked tremulously after a few seconds.

"Would I be doing this if he was?" muttered the Mouse through gritted teeth.

Isabeau knelt down by his side, and tapped the side of Navarre's face gently. "Etienne," she pleaded. "Etienne." Dirty water continued to come out of his mouth, but no sign of life was apparent. Isabeau was afraid.

The Mouse saw her frightened expression, and announced, "He's fine, my Lady." Then he paused, and his mouth twisted into a determined line. "For the moment. But he won't be when I've finished with him. I'm going to kill him."

Isabeau smiled, with a gulp. This was the Mouse of old, always ready to make light of a painful moment. "Do you have a blanket, my Lady?" Isabeau nodded dumbly, and gestured at last to little Phillippe to fetch one from the litter. As soon as the child was gone, she looked up bleakly at the Mouse's face. "He tried to kill himself?" she asked.

"Remarkable as it seems," the Mouse returned darkly, "I think so."

Isabeau hid her face in her hands. The boy was back instantly, and they wrapped Navarre with diffi-

culty in the blanket, and with even greater difficulty, negotiated his unconscious body to the fire. "I'm going to kill him when he wakes up," announced the Mouse once more.

He was angry. Isabeau, even in her fear, noted how well anger sat with the Mouse. It gave him a maturity, a presence she had never seen before.

They placed Navarre in the litter, and fussed over him like hens over a single-brood egg. Neither the minstrel nor the cleric gave any intimation that they would be on their way as the hours passed.

Everyone waited.

About noon, Navarre stirred. "Hell," he said with a thick, slurred tongue, "is not as I feared. Dark - but it is not hot here!"

The Mouse stuck his head inside the curtains at this mumble. "You deserve worse than hell!" he spat.

"Are you here too, Phillippe?" asked Navarre slowly. "Surely you too have not made a bargain with the devil?"

"Bargain with the Devil!?" screeched the Mouse. "Bargain with the... !?" He was speechless, and for several seconds his mouth worked up and down vigorously, but no sound came out. He rolled his eyes and beseeched heaven. "Lord," he pleaded, "let me knock some sense into his skull. Just one hard thump between the ears, Lord. Maybe two." He glared ferociously at Navarre. "I think I'll do it, permission or not!" he said through gnashing teeth.

"You fool!" said Navarre weakly, "why did you save me?" He tried to rise.

"And now I get abused for saving his life!" announced the Mouse, brows flexing skywards. "There's gratitude for you!" He placed his palm in the centre of Navarre's chest and pushed him slowly back down onto the bed. There was a glint of satisfaction in the depths of his eyes as he poked a finger at Navarre, and said, pulling his hood down like a cassock, "Bless you, my son. Would you like to tell Father Confessor Phillippe all about it?"

"Let me up!" said Navarre.

"Not a chance," stated the Mouse.

"Let me up!" snapped Navarre.

"Over my dead body," answered the Mouse.

"If you insist," returned Navarre coldly, and he reached for the dagger at Phillippe's belt.

The Mouse darted away and stared at Navarre with appalled eyes. He fell backwards into the dirt, sprawling awkwardly on the ground, and noticing that he had an interested audience. "Would you like to talk to him?" he whispered to Isabeau. "Please?"

Her frantic eyes shone brilliant with unshed tears. "No, Phillippe," she said, "you continue. Find out what's wrong."

Navarre was tumbling with difficulty from the litter. Phillippe took his dagger from his belt, threw it to the minstrel for safekeeping, then yanked the knight up to a wobbly stance. Seeing the icy determination in the stark blue eyes, the Mouse decided that he wouldn't try to dissuade Navarre from his present course of action - he'd just, for the moment, try for an explanation. "It's terribly unfair of you, Navarre," he said, "to leave us all in suspense for the rest of our lives. Monstrous of you not even to allay

our curiosity. If you must kill yourself, at least have the common decency to explain why."

Navarre leaned heavily on his shoulder, trying to focus his blurred vision. "God has abandoned us," he said. "He has answered none of my prayers - neither to smooth our way to the Oder, neither to make Valasquita well, neither to help us make haste to the north. When God did not answer, the devil did. And I must keep my bargain with him..."

Out of the swirling dimness behind Navarre, the minstrel's voice asked, "What is the bargain?"

Navarre swayed, but did not answer.

"Etienne...?" Isabeau's voice was fragile, pained.

Navarre turned away.

The Mouse was now in a passion of fury. He spun Navarre round and exploded, "What was the bargain, you scrammy-brained son of a scarper-skulled half-wit?"

"The devil will give the children freedom from the curse in return for my soul," replied Navarre quietly.

"You idiot!" yelled the Mouse. "You weak-witted, addle-headed, beetle-brained, folly-muddled, clod-poll, dunker-skulled... arrgh! ...simpleton! I wouldn't believe what the devil said if it paid me!" He heaved an angry breath. "And even then I'd check every five seconds to see that the money didn't disappear out of my pocket!"

"There was nothing to lose by the bargain," stated Navarre, placid in the face of the Mouse's outburst. "I asked God to give me a sign by this morning, and none has come. The devil has been more courteous - it is a risk worth taking for the children's sake."

"Etienne..." Isabeau's face was diamonded with tears. "You cannot..."

"How can I do other?" asked Navarre quietly.

"Why the sudden rush to abandon hope?" asked the Mouse. "If we get to the land of the midnight sun and nothing happens, then, why then you can negotiate a deal with his satanic majesty."

"The devil said it would not wait forever." Navarre sighed. "The deal had to be finalized by today or not at all..."

"NAVarre ...!" began the Mouse, only to be interrupted by the loud observation of the cleric, "Now that is the most incredibly suspicious aspect of the whole bargain!"

The Mouse turned to him. "Suspicious?" he queried.

"Why the now or never?" asked the cleric. "Unless the devil is under some urgency. Some that we know nothing about..." He was thoughtful for a moment. "What kind of sign did you ask for from God that you never got?" he asked Navarre.

The knight looked up, less reluctantly than before. "I wasn't specific. Anything would have done..."

"Then how do you know you didn't get the sign then?" asked the cleric.

Navarre paused, finally answering carefully, "I have seen no evidence of an answer."

"Would you recognise evidence if you saw it?" asked the cleric. He stared speculatively at Navarre and at Isabeau. "I wonder..." he said at last. "The good Lord is subtle, but not mischievous..." Then he



turned on his heel and went to his pack. "Promise me," he demanded, "vow to me that you will do nothing until I finish my calculations..."

Navarre shook his head. The movement was barely perceptible, but the Mouse saw it. "He promises," said Phillippe through gritted teeth. He called to the boy, his name-sake. "Watch your father like a hawk," he ordered, "and if he makes a move, yell. Yell like all the demons in Europe are after you."

"Yes, Phillippe," said the boy, biting his lip.

"Navarre," threatened the Mouse, "you make one untoward move, and I will sit on you, Phillippe will sit on you, my friend the minstrel will sit on you, and Isabeau and Valasquita will sit on you. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," said Navarre, his eyes wary and full of planning.

The cleric was already in his books, quill out, scratching symbols in the dirt. He caught his mouth in his fingers and expelled a puzzled breath. He shook his head. Everyone watched intently for five minutes, but it was too hard to keep undivided attention on a man scribbling incomprehensible notes on paper and in the dust. After an hour, the boy wandered over to the cleric and presented him with a portion of bread. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"It seems strange to me," said the cleric, chewing the bread ponderously, "that the devil comes to your father and proposes a bargain that must be taken up during a specified time. Suppose the reason were that an eclipse of the sort that freed your mother and father from the curse were to occur just after this time?"

Isabeau had been listening intently to this explanation. So had the others, but they were too puzzled to ask the question she did. "What makes you think so?" she asked.

"First," stated the cleric, "as we all are taught, the devil is known as the Father of Lies. I would not trust it. Secondly, it revels in torment. What better torment than to just miss out on the thing you desire most, and by your own folly? To torment all of you with the knowledge that you were once so close to freedom, but missed out?"

Navarre was listening deeply now.

"Thirdly, the sign. It seems to me that, if there is a sign, then it must come from your friend, Phillippe the Mouse, Karl the minstrel or myself - since we are the only folk you have met this morning. Perhaps you were delayed on your way to the Oder just so you could meet me, so I can tell you where an eclipse will occur in years to come."

"You have the art of astrology?" asked the minstrel.

The cleric laughed. "I am an astronomer mathematician," he answered. "Though I cast horoscopes, when pressed. It is an occupational hazard." Then, finishing his last mouthful of bread, he laid out a map in front of him and went back to his scribbling.

Navarre showed no sign of rebellion after this conversation. He never took his eyes off the cleric for a second. The Mouse never took his eyes from Navarre. Neither did Isabeau.

The silence was awesome.

After three hours, the cleric looked up and asked suddenly, "How far is it from here to Moravia? In time, I mean."

The minstrel considered briefly. "Four day's journey," he answered reflectively, "three day's hard ride, perhaps - south-west..."

The cleric stood up stiffly and stared at Navarre. "You must make it in two. You must try to get to the town of Znaim in Southern Moravia, but that is not absolutely essential. On the day of the new moon, you must be as close to it as possible. You must be in the path of the eclipse with both the children."

Navarre was already half-way to his horse. Little Phillippe he had picked up like a bundle on the way, tucked him on his hip, scooped the tiny hawk into the fold of his cloak and vaulted onto his horse.

"Follow me...!" he called as he plunged away across the marsh.



It was dawn, the second day. Isabeau had not slept, anxiety keeping her awake the night long. In her mind's eye she had seen Navarre racing through the darkness, fording streams by starlight with Valasquita in his arms, the wolfcub sprawled across the saddle. There had been ravines and scree slopes, dangerous places where his progress had almost halted; grim forests and mist-shrouded valleys, but he had passed them through undaunted. And still he was riding.

The sun came up, shafting light across the grey hills, tipping the peaks of the mountains rose-gold. Isabeau turned at the sound of a twig snapping. It was Phillippe.

"Be of good cheer!" he said. "Look!"

He pointed at a silver birch tree half-way up the slope in front of them. A wolf was standing, majestically, before it, while on a branch above, a golden hawk perched. The wolf seemed to scrutinize them a moment, before loping off. A moment later, the hawk took wing.

"Together!" Isabeau breathed. "In the light of day, at the same time." She smiled. "It is a good omen."

Toward nightfall on the third day, there was a column of dust on the road ahead. In the light of the setting sun, there was a bulky silhouette, black against the flaming sky. Voices were raised in a distant melody. Isabeau strained to pick it up, unsure...

It was the Mouse who was certain first. He spurred his newly-acquired horse on, crying, "Navarre! Navarre! Holla!"

Then they were all hugging each other, the Mouse and Phillippe, Navarre and Isabeau, Valasquita spinning like a dancer in their midst. "It worked!" called the Mouse, tossing Valasquita gently in the air. He had had his private doubts that it would. "It worked!" he repeated ecstatically.

After they had set up camp and eaten, Navarre and the children fell asleep almost instantly. The others continued awake, the minstrel plucking tentatively on his lute, starting and then pausing again.

The cleric came up to where Isabeau and Phillippe were sitting.

"I thank you, again," Isabeau said graciously.

"Thank rather the Lord who put me in your path," the cleric answered. "If you should have any trouble with your future family..." and here his eyebrows said everything as they rose and fell to the twinkle in his eye, "if there is any similar difficulty, I would be honoured to calculate any required eclipses for you."

The Mouse laughed. "I predict I shall become a seasoned traveller to the strangest parts of Europe this way..."

"Not just Europe," warned the cleric.

The Mouse's brows flew up in consternation.

"You think finding an eclipse would work again?" Isabeau asked.

"You need not fear on that account, I am sure," the cleric declared. Then he sighed. "But I fear a greater curse has befallen you and your husband," the cleric said.

"Greater curse?" the Mouse asked. "What can we do?"

"Nothing," The cleric shook his head, before glancing back over his shoulder. His voice dropped to a whisper. "The minstrel has already composed the first verse. The rhyme is inept, the tune abysmal."

"Oh," Phillippe said.

The cleric nodded, looking pityingly at Isabeau. "The rhythm is... unspeakable. The man actually asked me for a rhyme for "Valasquita".

"Oh," Isabeau said.

"Oh no," said Phillippe.

"I fear," the cleric said, "this is one tragedy that cannot be avoided."

Phillipe and Isabeau exchanged horrified looks. "Not all the way back to Aquila?" they said together.

(An earlier version of this story appeared in Enarraré #3 in 1987)

Symbiosis

Ten centuries alone would crush a mind,
 Would leave all trace of intellect destroyed;
 Its weight would irreversibly consign
 All sentience to black infinite void.
 You've felt the merest fraction of its force,
 And yet have shown blind terror — you can sense
 That isolation, left to run its course,
 Will grind you into inert nothingness.
 Let me into your mind, I can release
 The heavy chains of isolation's pain;
 I hold the key to solace and to peace —
 And you will never be alone again.
 — Una M. McCormack

"Laura, this is an ordinary shop. Why drug and paralyse a woman, dress her as a bride, then leave her to stand as a mannequin in the shop?"

"Get away from her!"

"Open fire!"

"Laura, this is a morgue. We're in a morgue. That means we're dead. That we're walking around right now means we're contravening the laws of nature."

"I am Duncan Macleod of the Clan Macleod."

"What do you mean, we can't die?"

"All it takes is one stroke of the sword...then your head is mine."

"When we reach our hundredth birthdays....will you leave? What about our two hundredth? When are you going to grow tired of me?"

"There can be only one!"

cue title music

REMINGTON STEELE
STARRING
STEPHANIE ZIMBALIST
AND
PIERCE BROSNAN
"STEELE BLADES"

SPECIAL GUEST STARS
ADRIAN PAUL
ALEXANDRA VANDERNOOT
WRITTEN BY
MARK OVERTON

"How about this one?"

Steele blinked tiredly. "I don't think so."

With a sigh, Laura put the dress back on the rack. "Well then, Mr. Steele, which one would you prefer?"

He smiled at her with a slight hint of devilment breaking through the fatigue. "I don't think any of them will suit me, Miss Holt, do you?"

"That's not what I was referring to and you know it," she sighed, moving onto the next rack of dresses. Steele adjusted his tie, gritted his teeth, and followed her with an expression of resigned agony.

"You know, I've done all sorts of things before," he said wearily, "but I've never done anything quite as mentally draining as shopping."

"Mmm," Laura said absently, rummaging amongst the clothing on display.

"I mean, it's tortuously slow, painful, and -"

"Hold this up a second, will you?" she requested, not listening. Steele grasped the dress thrust into his hands and held it up, doing his best to ignore the snickers from the other shoppers.

"No, I don't like it," Laura frowned. "You can put it back, thanks."

Hastily, Steele shoved it back into the racks. "And it damages human dignity," he muttered, finishing his previous sentence.

"Absolutely," Laura agreed unhesitatingly, not paying the remotest bit of attention. She selected another dress and examined it critically, then shook her head and put it back on the rack. Catching sight of Steele's reflection in the mirror, she studied him thoughtfully. "You could do with a different blazer."

Steele's hands fled to his blazer in self-defence. "What's wrong with it?"

"Doesn't go with the tie. Change the tie or change the blazer."

Moving past her, Steele studied himself in the mirror, adjusting his tie a little closer to his shirt collar. "Nothing wrong with this," he said defensively, pushing his hair back from his forehead.

"You were the one who said we should look our best for this party," Laura retorted, picking out a black velvet dress and wondering whether she had

the figure to wear it. She decided she probably did but it wasn't worth taking the risk, and put the dress back.

"It's not a party, it's a gathering," Steele said, still looking at himself in the mirror wondering if Laura was right about the tie. "A formal business meeting of a few associates and friends that Remington Steele is pleased to attend. I got the invitation through the post."

Laura appeared in the reflection by his shoulder. "Don't flatter yourself," she said caustically. "It was my Remington Steele they invited, not your interpretation of the part."

Steele chuckled. "Ah, but that's where you're mistaken, Miss Holt. They said I'd been recommended to them after my skilful handling of the diamond smuggling route from Acapulco to the United States."

Laura's eyes widened in anguish. "Again!"

"Again?" Steele queried.

"Again! Again you take all the credit!" She shoved a golden dress into his hands and made him hold it up for her perusal, as if in punishment. "I do all the hard work and you get all the rewards."

"Laura, think of me!" Steele protested. "I have to attend all these parties, mingle with the glitterati of the city...my life is one giant public relations exercise. It never stops! All those women crawling around me, men wanting my autograph..." His mouth curved into a smile. "All those women..."

"How terrible for you," she growled, turning and stalking away. "Anyway, who was it recommended you to these people after Acapulco?"

Steele frowned. "The invitation didn't say. It was just insistent that we should act like normal guests and not admit our true identities."

Laura nodded, accepting it without question. Several of their cases to date had involved rich clients anxious not to be seen using an agency like Remington Steele Investigations, so they had been forced to appear as ordinary people when discussing with their client. This looked like another similar case.

"Oh well," she said resignedly, and picked up the black velvet dress again. "I've got a day to lose a couple of pounds, then I should manage this."

"Done?" Steele asked hopefully.

"Almost." His smile faded. "I need a pair of shoes now. This way."

"AAAAH!"

The scream startled both of them almost out of their wits, and Laura dropped the velvet dress on the floor of the store. As one, she and Steele rushed out of the women's clothing department to where an elderly outfitter was standing with an expression of the utmost horror, staring up at a female mannequin in a bridal dress.

"What is it?" Laura demanded as she came to a stop.

The old woman extended a trembling finger towards the mannequin. "That thing...its eyes moved! It's alive!"

"Alive?" Steele queried. "I know they make them realistic these days, but they don't make them that realistic."

"Mr. Steele," Laura said quietly, stepping past him and examining the mannequin. She prodded the mannequin in one thigh; the thigh gave under her touch. Laura looked back at Steele. "This is a real woman."

Steele blinked and surprise rushed across his face. He moved forward and looked up at the mannequin's face. The eyes were closed now but the woman was beautiful even so, ash-blonde hair framing a face carefully hidden by a chiffony white veil. Her hands clutched a flowery bouquet and the wedding dress itself was one of the more modern ones, reaching to her knees and revealing nicely-formed legs culminating in small feet, daintily shod.

"Why isn't she moving?" Steele wondered aloud.

"She could be drugged." Laura stepped up onto the stand and lifted the veil from around the woman's face. She got the shock of her life when the eyes flicked open and stared at her. With a yelp of surprise, Laura flinched backwards and fell off the stand, caught and set back on her feet by Steele.

"Thank you, Mr. Steele," she said, regaining her composure.

"My pleasure." Steele looked around the shop; people were beginning to gather around them, attracted by the fuss going on around the woman. "Laura, this is an ordinary shop. Why drug and paralyse a woman, dress her as a bride, then leave her to stand as a mannequin in the shop?"

"Store, Mr. Steele," Laura corrected absently, looking up at the woman. Her eyes were still open, darting from side to side in silent pleading. "Come on, help me. We'd better get her down."

They climbed up on the stand and each took one side of the paralysed woman, lifting her off the stand with an effort and carefully lowering her to the floor of the shop. The elderly woman who had alerted them with her scream shivered as she saw the darting eyes and retreated back into the gathering crowd as Steele and Laura laid the woman on the floor.

"Someone call 911," Laura directed, crouching over the woman and examining her pupils carefully. She raised her voice. "Blink if you can hear and understand me."

The woman blinked once.

"So she's conscious," Steele observed. "Just paralysed."

"Yes," Laura nodded. She turned back to the woman. "Just lie still and try to relax. We're taking you to hospital."

"Nobody move!"

The rough harsh voice cut through the subdued atmosphere in the store like a knife. A young woman let out a muffled scream and ran towards the back of the store as the light from outside was cut off, the men looming large in Steele and Laura's vision.

"Get away from her!" one of the men ordered.

"She's paralysed!" Laura snapped. "She's ill, she can't -"

The snik-click of a safety catch being snapped off sounded loud in the confined area of the store. Laura and Steele stared at the barrels of several sub-machineguns.

"If I were you, Miss Holt, I'd step back a little," Steele murmured, smiling beatifically at the men

and raising his hands as he retreated from the paralysed bride. Laura did the same thing, watching powerlessly as two of the gun-wielders shouldered their weapons and picked up the woman, one by the shoulders and the other by the feet.

"Just stay still and nobody'll get hurt," the leader said. Like his companions, he wore a black sweater, black jeans, and a black balaclava over his head to obscure his identity. It had the disadvantage of making him look ridiculous, but then people like him were often more concerned with secrecy than style. He swung the submachinegun carefully round, covering the population of the store, as two of his men took the woman out into the main part of the big shopping mall. Beside him, two others were doing the same thing.

"Well done, folks," he said chirpily as soon as the men carrying the woman were gone. "Catch you later."

Gesturing to his attendants, he turned and ran from the store. There was a long moment of stunned silence.

"Well, we've got twenty-four hours until that party," Laura said to Steele.

His face held a resigned expression. "Somehow, Miss Holt, I thought you might say that."

"Don't look so bothered." She nudged him. "We needed something to do. Besides, think of all the new women who'll ask for your autograph."

Steele cleared his throat, adjusted his tie. "Well, I was always interested in doing my bit for truth, justice, and the American way."

Laura grinned and sprinted out of the shop.

★

They tore out of the shop and chased after the kidnappers. Easily visible, since they were dressed all in black amidst a crowd of colourful shoppers, they were also easily followed by the screams as the shoppers saw the submachineguns the kidnappers were carrying. Laura and Steele ran along the wake left by the rushing kidnappers and swiftly began to gain ground; the kidnappers were restricted by being unable to move quickly with the paralysed woman. They saw Laura and Steele chasing them and picked up speed, but gradually the gap began to narrow.

The kidnappers reached the stairs and began to descend, one of them remaining at the top and cocking the submachinegun. Laura saw it first and dived behind a fruit stand, Steele following seconds later as the gunman let loose a hail of bullets on the store. Apples, bananas, oranges, pineapples, all exploded in a shower of fruit juice and fragments and chips of wood flew from the stand in all directions as the rattle of the gun echoed through the store. Screams from the surrounding shoppers grew louder and everyone threw themselves flat on the floor, mimicking Laura and Steele's action.

The submachinegun clicked empty.

Lying behind the fruit stand, covered in wood chips and fragments of fruit, her hair sticky with fruit juice, Laura looked at Steele. "Let's get him," she said.

"Good idea," Steele nodded.

They leapt to their feet and charged the gunman. He saw them coming and attempted to run but they were already on him. Laura jumped on him from behind and he fell to his knees, the gun skittering across the floor. Steele punched him on the chin and the man dropped.

Laura looked at Steele in astonishment. "Aren't you going to complain that hurt?"

"Not at all, Miss Holt. I have a fist of steel, if you'll excuse the pun."

She blinked. "Fine. Let's get those others."

Laura ran off down the stairs. Steele winced and held his injured hand for a moment, then gritted his teeth and followed.

They reached the bottom of the stairs just in time to see the last of the gunmen step into a lift, the doors closing as Laura and Steele raced across to the stairs. Without stopping for a second they charged down them three at a time, down six flights of stairs only marginally slower than the lift.

Emerging into the mall's underground car park, Laura and Steele found they were seconds ahead of the lift. Laura stood in front of the lift doors and waited. "Got them now," she said in satisfaction.

Steele frowned. "Erm, Miss Holt, I don't wish to rain on your parade, but has it occurred to you these desperados are armed with submachineguns?" He brushed a piece of pineapple out of Laura's hair to prove his point.

"Good point, Mr. Steele," Laura said calmly, and she ducked behind a convenient Cadillac. Steele did the same just in time as the lift doors opened and the ugly snouts of two submachineguns poked out into the carpark warily. A moment later the first two men emerged carrying the bride, and then the other two behind them looking around warily.

"If you see those two come down those stairs, shoot 'em," the leader of the men said to his companion, who nodded and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. The remaining three crossed to a large white van, parked close to the lift, and opened the rear doors, preparing to push the woman through.

"Wait!"

A man in a dark blue suit stepped around from the corner of the van, looking down at the woman thoughtfully. He smiled. "Perfect," he said in an English accent, looking down with a smile. "Did everything go smoothly?"

"We lost Transom," the leader said.

The man in the suit shrugged. "I'll take care of him later." A gloved hand caressed the paralysed woman's cheek. "The important thing is that I have Sarah here back once more." He took a deep breath. "All right, load her in the van. We'll work out an antidote to the paralyzing agent later." He looked across to the gunman guarding the stairs. "By the way, they're behind that Cadillac over there. I saw them come down in the van's rear-view mirror."

Laura looked at Steele.

Steele looked at Laura.

"Get up!" the gunman snarled, submachinegun levelled. Hands in the air, Laura and Steele stood up.

"What d'you want done with them?" the leader of the kidnappers asked the man in the suit. He was staring at Laura and Steele thoughtfully, intrigued by

them in some way.

"I wonder..." the man murmured. Then he changed his mind. "No, I can't be bothered. Just shoot them. I'll deal with them later."

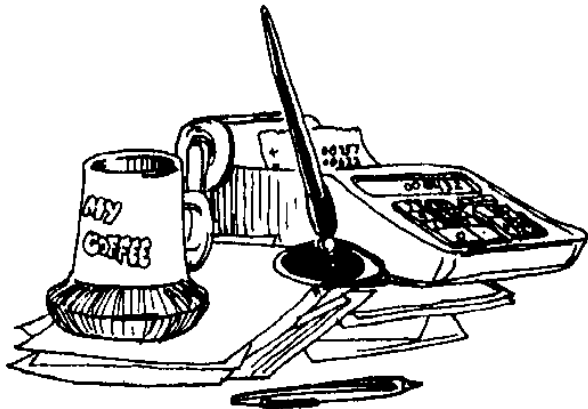
The gunman turned back and lifted the submachinegun.

"Laura," Steele said. "I - "

"Open fire!" the leader ordered harshly.

The submachinegun roared and bullets spat out of the barrel with deadly force. Laura and Steele were hurled back against the wall of the carpark, sliding down to the floor and leaving a trail of gory red blood behind them.

★



"Mildred Krebs?"

Seated at her desk, Mildred didn't look up from the papers spread across her desk. "What can I do for you?" she muttered, sorting through the agency's tax accounts and using all her IRS-taught abilities to try and produce some kind of result that wouldn't get them arrested for fraud. If only the boss worked at his tax returns better...

"I'm Inspector Michael Cooper."

The cops.

Mildred's first thought was to run. Her second thought was to realise she hadn't actually done anything wrong yet. Her third thought was "why is he here?"

"Why are you here, Inspector?" she asked, raising her head to look at the man. He was in his early thirties, wearing the traditional trenchcoat and hat, a neat if inexpensive suit beneath it. He wore a grave expression on his face.

"You are Mildred Krebs?"

She frowned. "Ye-es...."

Cooper looked sympathetic. "I'm sorry, Miss Krebs. It's my sad duty to tell you that your employer Remington Steele and his associate Laura Holt were gunned down in a shopping centre earlier today. They were killed outright."

★

Cold. She was cold.

She was very cold.

Laura opened her eyes.

She was staring up at an antiseptically clean white ceiling, and she could smell the pungent detergent someone had used to wash it with. The room was cold and silent, and she realised suddenly that

she was lying on a metal slab - that was why she was starting to shiver. She was also naked under the thin sheet which was covering her up to the neck.

Laura sat up, clutching the sheet to her chest, and looked around her. There were a number of similar slabs all around, each one with a motionless sheet-covered form. The room was lit, but the doors were closed and probably locked as well.

She was in a morgue.

Laura's eyes widened in alarm. Carefully, she got down from the slab and looked around for her everyday clothing. Something dirty grey caught her eye and she realised it was a scientist's lab coat, slung carelessly across a benchtop with the neck dangling in a sink. Laura padded over and dropped the sheet on the floor, pulling on the lab coat instead.

A hand touched her shoulder and she spun round in alarm.

"This is not good," Steele said thoughtfully, ignoring her startlement.

Laura sighed and relaxed just a fraction. "Don't creep up on me like that," she admonished him, pulling the lab coat a little tighter. Steele was still wrapped in his mortuary sheet, though around his waist only, his chest bare.

"Let's find you some clothes," she said, starting to look around the morgue. Steele grabbed her and pulled her back; she looked up at him quizzically. "What is it?"

He was looking very puzzled indeed. "Laura, this is a morgue. We're in a morgue. That means we're dead. That we're walking around right now means we're contravening the laws of nature."

She shrugged. "They probably just made a mistake."

"What's the last thing you remember?" he queried.

Laura frowned. "Erm....we were in the car park and then...." Her voice tailed off slowly, her expression amazed.

Steele nodded. "Exactly. There aren't many people I know of who've survived submachinegun blasts at point-blank range." He looked at her in sudden alarm. "Laura, perhaps we're ghosts!"

"Now you're being silly," she said scornfully, spotting another lab coat and stalking across the morgue to get it for him. "Ghosts are just figments of the imagination. They're not real and we're not dead."

Steele brushed a hand across his chest. "Laura, I felt those bullets."

"Surgery," she suggested. "They can do wonderful things with scalpels these days."

"Then why are we in the morgue? What did they do, decide to put us on ice while they went for a tea-break?"

Laura sighed. "Come on. First priority is to get some proper clothes. Then we get out of here, all right?"

"Sooner the better," he murmured, but he followed her quietly enough as they walked towards the morgue exit. The doors had glass windows set into them and Laura peered through one of these. The corridor beyond was dark, silent, and happily empty.

"Come on," she beckoned, pushing open one of the doors, which turned out to be unlocked after all, and stepping into the corridor. Steele followed and they padded barefoot along the cold linoleum of the corridor until Laura stopped suddenly, Steele almost banging into her. She turned and pointed to a door saying "EQUIPMENT STORE #223".

"Worth a try," she said.

Steele was just about to answer when they heard a whine and hum of lift machinery. Turning, Laura saw the doors of the lift at the far end of the corridor begin to open; she and Steele hastily dived into the storeroom and pulled the door almost shut behind them. A moment later they were peering through the tiny crack, waiting to see who it was arriving.

Two men came into view, moving slowly and carefully towards the morgue, wary as if they expected attack. The first was bulky and slightly overweight, but his heavy brooding face contained plenty of menace, the effect heightened by the thin pale scar on his left cheek. The second man was smaller and thinner than his companion, but his vulpine features lent a demonic air which made him seem just as menacing. It wasn't their descriptions that gave Laura and Steele the clue, though. They carried black submachineguns.

"Two of our friends from the carpark," Steele murmured in Laura's ear. She nodded silently as the two men drew nearer.

"There it is, up ahead," the fat one noted.

"Let's get them," Laura breathed.

She felt Steele nod in the darkness behind her, then threw open the door and dived on the thinner man. A moment later the sound of fisticuffs echoed in her ears as Steele charged the other one. Laura's victim was knocked back against the wall, dropping the gun, by the force of her charge; she kned him in the stomach and chopped him on the back of the neck with equal speed. Making small choking sounds and scrabbling at his neck, he dropped to his knees. Laura grabbed him by the neck and choked him into unconsciousness.

Steele ducked as a punch from the fat man whistled over his head and hit the hospital wall with a dull thud. Stepping inside the arm, he jabbed two fingers into the man's eyes; he stumbled back with a howl of pain and Steele, abandoning all pretence at a fair fight, kicked him where it'd do the most good. The fat man whimpered and sank to the ground.

Standing over the two unconscious men, Laura and Steele regarded each other.

"Clothes," they said simultaneously.

★

Twenty minutes later, the lift doors up from the morgue parted to reveal two sorry-looking people. The thin man's clothes were too tight for Laura, giving her minor agonies every time she moved, while Steele was almost dwarfed by the fatter man's clothing; he had rolled up the sleeves of the sweater but it still did him little good, because they kept falling down. The submachineguns they had left, empty, in the morgue beside the two unconscious men.

Stepping out of the lift, Laura led the way to the exit from the hospital. "The first thing we have to do

is find Mildred and tell her we're all right," she noted over her shoulder, "and then - "

She stopped moving and speaking at the same time, and Steele bumped into her. He was about to complain when he felt it too; a buzzing, harsh-edged and somehow travelling through the air, surrounded him, giving him pins-and-needles and making his hair feel funny. Almost against his will, he turned in the same direction in which Laura was already staring.

The man in the ponytail regarded them carefully, standing at the entrance to the hospital with a very attractive blonde woman beside him. Steele and Laura stared silently at him, intrigued and worried by the effect he was having on them. For a long moment, the four people stared at one another and said nothing; then the man turned to the woman.

"Wait over there, Tessa," he instructed. She nodded and moved away, glancing back at him a little worriedly all the same. The man moved across to Steele and Laura; he was about Steele's height, his long hair black and his clothing fashionable without being expensive. His eyes searched their faces.

"I am Duncan Macleod," he said, "of the Clan Macleod."

Steele and Laura stared at him.

"Congratulations," Laura nodded eventually.

Duncan didn't smile. "What are your names?"

"Laura Holt. This is my boss, Remington Steele."

"Remington Steele Investigations," Steele added.

Duncan looked at them carefully. "I don't want any trouble. Not here, not outside. I don't want to fight. I'm out of the Game at the moment."

"The Game?" Laura looked up at Steele, who shrugged, then back to Duncan. "Who even said we wanted to fight you, Mister - ah - Macleod?"

"Duncan." He looked them over again. "Wait. I've heard of the two of you. You were the ones who protected the Royal Lavulite jewels."

Steele shrugged deprecatingly. "Well, I can't take all the credit. Some of it was due to Miss Holt here....though I did mastermind the operation." He winced suddenly as Laura carefully and with great malice stepped on his toe.

"You're new," Duncan noted.

"New to what?" Laura demanded, getting annoyed.

Duncan glanced back at Tessa, still waiting with an expression of concern on her face. Then he turned back to Steele and Laura. "Not here, not now. Where do you live, Mr. Steele?" Steele told him. "Go there and wait for me. I'll be about half an hour. Don't let anyone else in, especially if you sense them like you did me."

"But why - " Laura started to ask.

"Don't," Duncan interrupted her. "I know you don't know me, but this is important. Please. I'll be half an hour."

Steele put a hand on Laura's shoulder, stopping her from speaking. "We'll be there."

Duncan nodded, turned, and walked away. Laura waited until he was out of earshot before she turned to Steele, looking up at him angrily. "Why did you do that? We could have got some answers out of him?"

"Could we?" Steele responded. "How do you interrogate someone in the middle of a hospital, Laura? Besides, he's said he'll be at the flat in half an hour. This is the first real guarantee we have of getting some answers." He turned towards the exit. "Come on."

They left the hospital and started down the steps towards the small group of taxis parked nearby, Laura following Steele with the occasional grimace of pain from the too-tight clothing. As they reached the bottom of the steps, they stopped again and stared around. The shiver was back, buzzing in their minds.

"Over there," Laura said quietly, nodding to where a limousine was parked a short distance from the hospital entrance. Steele squinted, trying to see through the limousine's open window who was inside.

The car door opened and the man in the blue suit from the underground carpark stepped out. He smiled at them from across the carpark.

"Nice to see you again," he said, "Mr. Steele....Miss Holt."

The sword in his hand glinted evilly.

★

"But why?" Tessa demanded, frustrated. "I don't understand why you have to go and see those two people, Duncan. Is it just because they're the same? The same as you, immortal?"

"Something like that," Duncan nodded.

"Can't it wait?" Tessa cast a glance in the direction of the hospital ward. "Jacques is dying. You promised to come with me."

"I know, sweetheart, I know." Duncan shrugged helplessly. "There's nothing I can do. Rules are rules - I have to meet them, tell them the rules."

"They could work it out for themselves," Tessa muttered rebelliously.

"They don't have to," Duncan responded. "Not while there's someone to help them. And they'll need help."

★

"Run!" Laura cried. She looked round and saw Steele already vanishing into the darkness. A glance back over her shoulder showed the man in the blue suit advancing, sword at the ready; Laura sprinted after Steele as fast as possible, through the grounds of the hospital.

During the day, the hospital grounds would have been pleasantly laid out, with nicely-mowed lawns and well-kept paths for weary patients to take a stroll and forget their fatigue. To Laura and Steele, it was a dark and shadowy place, filled with menace and threats in every corner. They skidded round the rear of the hospital and ran, as one, towards a group of trees that offered the only cover in this part of the gardens. Overhead, a raven watched them with evil eyes.

"D'you think we've lost him?" Laura demanded, leaning against a tree to get her breath back. Steele was watching the entrance to the copse warily, his eyes searching through the darkness.

"Unlikely, I'm afraid," he responded absently.

"I was hoping you'd reassure me, Mr. Steele," Laura retorted, pushing herself away from the tree and standing beside him. "What have we gotten ourselves into this time? A paralysed woman dressed as a bride and placed as a mannequin in a shopping mall, a madman with a sword, a mad Scotsman who thinks he knows what's going on, and now a chase." She sighed and clicked her heels. "There's no place like home," she said hopefully.

"I'm sorry to rain on your party, Dorothy," Steele said, "but I don't think that's going to happen. Look."

The entrance to the copse, faintly illuminated by the light from the windows of the hospital, darkened suddenly. The man in the blue suit smiled at them. "So here you are," he said, his accent faintly Teutonic. "Which one first?"

"First for what?" Steele demanded.

"First to lose your head, of course," the man said. "But then, I wouldn't expect you to understand - you're new, after all. So I'll just take your heads now."

"I wouldn't do that," said a new voice from behind Laura and Steele. They spun round to see a figure move out of the shadows, eyes hard.

Duncan stared at the other immortal. "These two are under my protection. You have to go through me first."

The man considered him. "And who might you be?"

"I am Duncan Macleod, of the Clan Macleod. You?"

"Lentz, Christopher Lentz. You wouldn't be any relation to Connor Macleod?"

"My kinsman," Duncan nodded.

"I thought so. There aren't many Highlanders in the Game." Lentz hefted his sword thoughtfully. "How old are you, Duncan Macleod?"

"Old enough."

"Old enough for it to be too much of a risk," Lentz smiled. "I'll come for Mr. Steele and Miss Holt some other time, then. Bye."

"I don't think so." Steele and Laura's eyes widened in surprise as Duncan unlimbered the dragon-head katana he had been carrying inside his trenchcoat and stepped forward. "Let's find out now."

Lentz smiled. "No, no. I never fight the experienced, Macleod; only the weak and the unready. I'll see you sometime."

He turned and ran, footsteps fading into the night. Duncan took a couple of steps after him, then apparently changed his mind. He turned and looked at Steele and Laura, who had stood by as silent witnesses.

"Are either of you any good with a sword?" he asked.



★

"What do you mean, we can't die?" Laura repeated incredulously.

"Which part of it didn't you understand - can't, or die?" Duncan asked with just a hint of a grin. "I mean you're immortal. That's how you survived all those gunshots when Lentz had his men fire on you."

"Then why intervene when Lentz attacked?" Steele asked. "If we're immortal, it wouldn't matter."

They were sitting in the back of Duncan's car, a 1950s Thunderbird; Tessa, his partner, had agreed to take a taxi back after she had finished visiting her friend, a Frenchman who was dying of cancer. Duncan was driving them back to Steele's apartment, answering questions along the way.

"That's the only way you can die," Duncan said, answering Steele's question. "If someone takes your head, it's all over."

"And how old are you, Mr. Macleod?" Laura asked.

"Duncan. I'm three hundred and ninety-three."

"Must be hard on the birthday candles," Steele said flippantly.

"And what's this Game you and Lentz mentioned?" Laura pressed, ignoring Steele's comment. "Do all of you try and chop each other's heads off for a laugh, or is there something else?"

Duncan swung the Thunderbird around a corner. "Yes, there's something else. Each time you

take someone's head, you receive the dead immortal's strength and knowledge - it's called the Quickening. When there are no more immortals left, the last of us will have the power to rule the world - or destroy it."

"Oh marvellous," Steele said, staring at the back of Duncan's head. "So if there's a sword-wielding maniac chasing me, at least I know he has a good reason."

"Please, Mr. Steele," Laura said tetchily. "Duncan, what else?"

"That's the basics. I'll tell you the rest when we get to Mr. Steele's apartment."

★

"Did you get them, sir?" the chauffeur inquired, leaping out of the driver's seat to open the rear door of the limousine. Handing him the sword, Christopher Lentz climbed into the back.

"No, I did not," he answered shortly. "Another of us intervened. A Duncan Macleod, kinsman to Connor. Another Highlander."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir." The chauffeur seated himself at the wheel and pulled the door shut. "Where to, sir?"

"Home," Lentz ordered, thinking hard. He picked up the cellular phone which was resting beside him and dialled a number. After a moment, the connection was made, and a slow smile appeared on Lentz's face. "Yevgeny? I want you to dig into the files. Everything you have on a Duncan Macleod, and then Remington Steele Investigations as well."

★

"Is this some kind of a joke?" Mildred demanded. Beside her, Cooper's face reddened into near-apoplexy.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded in turn. "Who stole Steele and Miss Holt's bodies?"

The mortuary attendant went white. "Er, sir, I don't - " he began to stutter. "Sir, sir, n-n-nobody could have - "

"Could have what?" Cooper bellowed. "Are you telling me that they got up and left by themselves?!"

"Inspector," Mildred interrupted sharply. "Inspector, it's late and I'm tired and I haven't done the washing yet. Unless you've actually got some bodies for me to identify, I refuse to believe they're dead. Can I go now?"

Cooper opened and closed his mouth without saying anything, like a goldfish that needs feeding. Eventually, his shoulders slumped. "Yes, Miss Krebs," he said. "Thanks for your time."

Mildred harrumphed in irritation, turned, and left the morgue with the faintest of shivers at having had to go into that dreadful place in the first instance. Cooper turned to the mortuary attendant, an evil look on his face. "I want to know everything about this place's security procedures," he said. "And I mean everything."

The attendant went even more white.

★

"So what do you know about Christopher Lentz?" Laura demanded.

Duncan shrugged. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Steele prompted.

"Nothing. I've never met him before." Duncan considered the cup of coffee he was holding. "He said he only killed the weak and the unready. Probably preys on people who have just turned immortal and haven't had the time to get a sword and learn the Rules. I know others who do that."

"People like us," Laura said grimly.

"Yes."

"So we have to learn to fight with swords?" Steele said skeptically.

Duncan shrugged. "No. You could just sit there with a big notice saying Take My Head if you wanted." He put the coffee-cup down. "I have to go now, or Tessa will strangle me. Don't leave the apartment unless you have to; if you sense another immortal, make sure it's me before you open the door. Understand?"

"All right," Laura nodded. Steele did the same thing, noticeably more reluctantly. Duncan rose and headed for the apartment door. As he put his hand on the handle, he turned. "By the way."

Laura and Steele turned. "What?"

Duncan grinned. "Don't lose your heads."

He pulled the door open and left the apartment. As the door closed behind him, Laura and Steele looked at each other.

"Drink?" Steele asked. She nodded wordlessly. "Drink," he confirmed, and crossed to where a bottle of wine was sitting unopened. A couple of wine glasses were swiftly filled and he passed one to Laura.

"Cheers," he said.

"Yes," she said absently, drinking the wine almost in one gulp and holding out her glass for more. Steele silently refilled it and Laura drank half of that as well before relaxing a little.

"Well," Steele said, sitting down beside her, "this is turning out to be an unusual day."

"Unusual?" Laura gave a short laugh. "I think you mean unique, Mr. Steele, don't you? I've been shot, I've woken up in a mortuary, I've been chased by a man with a sword, and then told by another man with a sword that I can't die. That's pretty unique. Ouch!" she said sharply, putting her finger to her mouth.

"Problem?"

"I've cut my finger." She showed him the small drop of blood welling up from the cut.

Then it happened.

A tiny grey spark of energy danced on Laura's finger for a moment. Steele and Laura stared at the smooth skin with no trace of the wound.

"Good grief," Steele said slowly.

Laura raised haunted eyes to him. "Mr. Steele....I think it's true. We are immortal."

The doorbell cut through the silence like a knife, and they both jumped in shock and surprise. Steele leapt up and stood beside the sofa indecisively. He looked down at Laura. "It could be...."

Laura shook her head. "We'd have sensed him."

"Yes, but - well, but -"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, stop worrying," she said in annoyance, and got up from the sofa. Nudge-

ing Steele aside, she crossed to the door and stared through the peephole in the centre. She turned back with worry on her face.

"Who is it?" Steele asked.

"Another immortal," Laura said.

"Who?"

She grinned suddenly. "Someone who's always around."

She pulled open the door.

"Hiya, boss," said Mildred.



The building was at least six storeys high, the first five taken up with a big department store right in the centre of the city. The sixth floor was closed to all but the most exalted people, because Christopher Lentz had no intention of allowing any immortal up to his private penthouse. As he had told Duncan in the copse outside the hospital, Lentz fought only the new immortals; let the older ones kill each other, he would stand on the sidelines and, when the time came, be one of the last ones.

He entered the penthouse in a bad mood, annoyed that Duncan Macleod had intervened in his killing of Steele and Miss Holt. Passing a uniformed servant without a glance, Lentz opened the big double doors into the penthouse's main room and looked around imperiously. "Sarah?" he demanded.

The bedroom door opened. "Yes, dear."

Her ash blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, the woman who had been paralysed in the shopping mall entered the room with her eyes suitably downcast in respect. She came as beckoned to Lentz, and he kissed her perfunctorily on the cheek before throwing himself down on the sofa.

"Did it go well, my lord?" Sarah asked.

"No, it did not," Lentz said bad-temperedly. He looked at her with a sudden snarl on his face. "And don't pry into my affairs!" His hand blurred and slapped her round the face; Sarah flinched with the blow but did not cry out.

"Yes, my lord," she murmured submissively.

"Good," Lentz said. "Are you pleased I rescued you?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Good." Lentz said again, examining his fingernails. "It was a clever ploy, hiding you the way they did; unfortunately, they forgot to account for the fact that one of them would talk when put...well, under pressure." He noticed his ex-wife's slight shiver and his smile widened. "Robert talked in the end."

"Mr. Lentz?" a nervous voice asked with a Russian accent.

Lentz looked up lazily. "Yes, Yevgeny?"

The Russian was thin and looked underfed, his clothes slightly too big for him and poorly tailored. "Mr. Lentz, I did as you asked. This is the information we have on Duncan Macleod." He held up a sheet of paper. "And this is the information on Remington Steele Investigations...there's something odd there."

Lentz frowned. "What?"

"Remington Steele....we have no information for him. None." Yevgeny blinked nervously. "I have no idea why not. Our best information-gatherers were unable to get anything."

Lentz took the two sheets of paper, pushing Sarah aside, and examined the one on Steele and Laura. "So they were," he mused aloud. "Intriguing."

He crumpled the sheets and threw them back to Yevgeny. "Have the chauffeur bring the car round at six pm tomorrow," he ordered. "I will be practicing up here all day tomorrow. I'm not to be disturbed unless it's absolutely vital - is that understood?"

Yevgeny nodded. "Yes, Mr. Lentz."

He hurried from the room as Lentz looked round. Sarah was still kneeling on the floor where he had pushed her. The immortal smiled. "Sarah, stand up."

She did so, still looking down. Lentz took her chin in one hand and raised it. "Don't look so sad," he admonished. "We still have the rest of the night in which to play."

Sarah smiled; but as Lentz pulled her toward the bedroom the smile faded and did not return.

★

Warmth on her face woke Laura up. She blinked in the morning sunshine, streaming in through the windows of Steele's bedroom, and yawned languidly. For a moment she forgot her cares and worries, wrapped up in the warmth of the sheets, the world outside brightly-lit with the sky a clear blue.

Reality returned and she remembered.

"Rats," Laura said aloud.

She rolled off the bed and picked up her clothes from where she had carelessly thrown them across the chair. Quickly she dressed and went into the front room, where Steele was sprawled half on and half off the couch. Laura's eyes widened as she saw the thin metal blade resting on the coffee table. Very quietly, she picked it up and examined it; the metal, though looking smooth at a distance, was pockmarked and scratched when she looked at it closely. Although by no means a swords expert, Laura guessed that the weapon was at least two centuries old.

"Don't play with swords, Miss Holt," Steele said without opening his eyes.

Laura nearly dropped the sword, shocked. "Don't do that!"

"Sorry." Steele opened his eyes and sat up, taking the sword from her. "An eighteenth century duellist's sword. I found it in a shoe-box on top of the wardrobe last night."

"A shoe-box?"

"Sort of a shoe-box," he amended. "Actually, it was buried beneath four pairs of shoes, a woolen scarf my great-aunt once knitted for me, a pocket-watch, six love letters, and a mouldy packet of wine gums."

Laura's eyebrows rose. "Love letters?"

Steele looked embarrassed. "Well, I'd better not say her name, she's a princess these days."

"Oh. So why the sword?"

"Because Lentz was using one, and Macleod had one as well." Rising, Steele took the sword from her and weighed it in his hand. "From what was said, it looks like this little beauty will be our only hope."

"Our?" Laura queried. "I think I'll get one for myself, thanks. I don't fancy my chances much if I'm supposed to rely on you being around."

"Oh?" Steele looked at her, slightly bemused. Laura saw the momentary hurt on his face. "What's that mean, then?"

She backtracked hastily. "We're not always together, Mr. Steele. We're not joined at the hip or anything."

Steele wasn't persuaded. "That wasn't what you meant. You were worried about me disappearing on you, weren't you?"

Laura hesitated. "No, of course not," she said, but her voice lacked conviction, even to her own ears.

Steele shrugged dismissively. "Well, whatever," he said, clearly being colder than he felt. He turned away, picked up a soft downy cloth of some kind, and ran it up and down the blade, cleaning any dust which might have fallen on it whilst he was asleep. The blade glinted in the sunshine. "Still as sharp as it was when I picked it up in Russia."

"Russia?"

"Russia. Friend of mine, Arkady Petrovich Ivanko. Good man. We used to practice in the forest with swords sometimes, early morning or late evening." Steele's eyes had that curiously distant look he often had when reminiscing. "He used to call me Inostranyets."

"Why? That's not your real name, by any chance?" Laura said hopefully.

Steele chuckled. "Inostranyets is Russian for foreigner."

She sighed. "It would be."

The blade swished a little as Steele moved it through the air, the soft whistling sound somehow slightly menacing. "It's a duelling sword," he repeated, "used by noblemen in centuries gone by."

"Only for duelling?" Laura queried.

"Oh, there's no only about duelling," Steele informed her. "Sometimes duels could be fatal."

"Really." Laura moved suddenly, grabbing the sword from him and holding it to his neck. "Ha! Surrender, or you will fall before me!" she declared in mock-heroic style.

Steele flinched. "Laura -"

Putting a hand on his chest, Laura shoved him so he fell back onto the sofa. The tip of the sword hovered inches from his throat. "I said yield," she insisted mockingly.

The cold shiver struck them both instantly. A second later the thick blade of a katana hit the blade of the duelling sword with a clang, knocking it out of Laura's hands.

Duncan looked at them unsmilingly. "Two rules. Never play with swords, and never let your guard down. This is a battle."

"Yes, very good -" Steele started to say, getting up. Duncan seemed to blur and suddenly the katana was at Steele's throat.

"One stroke of the sword and your head is mine!" he hissed in Steele's ear. "Remember how easy it is to take someone's head, Mr. Steele. Never let it be yours...apart from anything else, death's very unpleasant."

"And you'd know, presumably?" Laura said, retrieving the duelling sword as Duncan released Steele. "You said you were nearly four hundred."

"Yes," Duncan nodded. "So you both have to listen when I tell you the Rules. In the Game, mistakes can be fatal." He paused to think about that. "No. In the Game, mistakes are fatal."

★

Christopher Lentz hesitated. Then, "Enter!"

Her eyes downcast, Sarah entered the practicing room, a large empty space with wooden floorboards. Lentz, dressed in tight clothing for freedom of movement, was sparring with a wooden figure. "My lord," she said, "Yevgeni wants to speak to you. He says it's urgent."

"Urgent, is it?" Lentz growled. Reluctantly, he left his sword on a stand and crossed to Sarah. "Tell him I'll meet him in the main room."

She curtsied. "Yes, my lord."

Lentz watched her leave with a sense of satisfaction. It had been a stroke of luck, finding Sarah. She was the exact image of his last love, and the exact personality as well. Lentz believed passionately in reincarnation, and Sarah was the fifth reincarnation of his lover, the mortal Annette. For a moment, the image of sixteenth-century Paris filled his mind; then he blinked the sights and sounds away. His home time was gone; now he had to look to the future.

Striding into the main room, removing his practice gloves, Lentz looked at the malnourished Russian. "Well, Yevgeni? I told you I was not to be disturbed unless it was urgent."

"Yes, my lord, I know," Yevgeni apologised hastily, "but this is urgent. We've tracked down someone who may help you with Steele and Miss Holt."

"Oh?"

Yevgeni consulted a notepad he had in one hand. "Yes, my lord. She works as secretary at the detective agency which they run."

Lentz nodded slowly. "Sounds reasonable. Her name?"

"Mildred Krebs."

★

Laura opened the door. "See? I told you."

"You can't take chances, Miss Holt," Steele murmured from behind her, the duelling sword gripped firmly in one hand. He followed her out into the corridor, locking his room behind him.

"Don't you think you could put the sword away for just a minute?" Laura asked, looking down the corridor. "People are going to talk, you know."

"Well..." Steele said doubtfully.

"Look, give it here," Laura said impatiently, taking it from him and stashing it inside her long coat, which reached to her ankles. The tip of the blade was just about concealed inside the coat. "There, happier?"

"It'll be difficult to extract," Steele observed.

"I'll manage," Laura sighed. "Come on, let's go. Immortal or not, we have to earn a living down at the agency. It won't be for long, Duncan said he'd turn up at the agency later."

She marched off down the corridor, Steele following doubtfully, until they reached the lift. Once

inside, Steele relaxed a little and he smiled down at her. "You know, there's one advantage about this."

"Oh?" Laura asked suspiciously.

"I get to be in your company for a lot longer than I thought, Miss Holt."

To his surprise, Laura didn't smile. Instead, she shivered a little and, as the lift doors opened, marched straight out without looking at him. Steele, frowning, followed her out and across the grey concrete floor of the carpark.

"Hey, you two!"

They turned round sharply as a youth in jeans and leather jacket sauntered across to them, grinning insolently. "Hey," he said again, "how's it going?"

"Just fine, thanks," Steele said, turning to go.

"Hey, don't do that, man," the youth said instantly. A gun seemed to leap into his hand out of nowhere. Laura tapped Steele on the shoulder and he turned round slowly. The youth grinned at them. "Now that's better. Why don't we just -"

He was looking at Steele as he spoke, and Laura took her chance. Her hand flashed inside the coat and drew the duelling sword. It made a high-pitched whistling sound as it flashed through the air, and the young man yelled out as it scraped the skin on his hand, drawing blood. The gun clattered noisily to the ground.

"What the -"

"Now, now, let's not talk to ladies like that," Steele interrupted, scooping up the gun. "Just run along."

"Wait a minute," Laura said, "maybe we should -"

"Let's not go to all the trouble," Steele interrupted her in turn. "Just go on," he ordered the youth. Taking his chance, he ran off.

"Why did you do that?" Laura demanded.

"Because neither you nor I want questions about swords being asked, especially by the police," Steele replied quietly in her ear, "do we, Miss Holt?"

Laura looked down at the duelling sword. "No," she agreed.

"Let's go on to the agency," Steele said.

★

Mildred arrived at the office early.

As she was fond of telling her errant offspring, what could be done today should never be put off until tomorrow. As a result, as she rode the elevator up the skyscraper to the agency office, Mildred was already beginning to plan her day in some detail, right down to the exact times of her lunch break. Always assuming that nothing untoward happened, of course.

She ran over the events of yesterday in one part of her mind whilst working out the final solution to Steele's tax returns. The boss and Laura had explained to her that it was all a covert undercover operation to make their targets think they were dead, and Mildred had been given instructions to behave as if everything was normal and she didn't know.

The lift doors opened and Mildred stepped out onto the floor, deep in thought, walking with her eyes looking at the carpet as she was pondering over these various subjects. She didn't see the man until she walked into him.

"Sorry," she apologised absently, and started to walk past him. The man took her arm and Mildred looked up, frowning.

"Mildred Krebs?" the man inquired. He was middle-sized, quite burly, and developing a beer gut. His eyes were grey, and they stared at her with a peculiar curiosity she found disquieting.

"That's me," she answered. "Office hours don't start until nine-thirty -"

"I don't want the office," the man said. He looked over Mildred's shoulder. "This is her, Yevgeni."

"Who?" Mildred started to turn when something pricked the side of her neck. Drowsiness overwhelmed her and her knees buckled.

Yevgeni caught the older woman as she started to fall to the carpet. He handed her to his associate. "Take her down the emergency stairs," he instructed, "and put her in the van. I'll set up the agency office for when Steele and Miss Holt arrive."

The associate nodded, lifted Mildred with some difficulty, and started off down the back stairs. When he was out of sight, Yevgeni turned back to the agency doors, REMINGTON STEELE INVESTIGATIONS emblazoned across the clear glass in smooth white letters. He picked the lock almost without pausing, switched off the burglar alarm, and went inside.

★

Laura and Steele arrived at the skyscraper ten minutes later, travelling together in Steele's car rather than separately. Laura thought how ironic it was that they were staying closer together right now than they had been before their first deaths.

Steele swung the car into a parking space and switched off the engine. He looked sideways at Laura. "Shall we go upstairs?"

"I suppose," Laura said absently, picking up the duelling sword and exiting the vehicle. She froze in surprise. "Mr. Steele!"

Steele leapt out of the car just in time to see Mildred being bundled into the back of a bulky white transit van. Laura looked at him, and then started across the carpark without a word. Steele followed just as the van's engine coughed and roared into life. Laura was within six inches of the rear doors as the vehicle started to move, pulling out of its space and speeding away towards the exit.

"Mildred!" Laura called futilely as the van ascended the ramp and disappeared into the traffic.

"It's no good," Steele said. "She's gone."

From the side of the carpark, Yevgeni watched and smiled.

★

The lift doors opened and Laura and Steele stepped out onto the carpeted floor, looking both sides warily. Steele had taken the duelling sword back from Laura and it was now stashed under his coat as they walked towards the agency offices.

"This is ridiculous, you know," Laura said. "We'd feel it if there was another immortal around, wouldn't we?"

"Maybe," Steele said. "I don't know about you, Miss Holt, but I'm feeling decidedly insecure right at the moment."

They reached the agency doors and went inside. All was silent, unsurprisingly; the absence of Mildred was noticeable in the way the office seemed to be quietly disused. Laura looked at Mildred's desk sadly, missing the comfortable gossiping presence of the older woman.

"What now?" she asked.

Steele put the sword down on Mildred's desk. "A good question, Miss Holt. A cup of tea wouldn't go amiss right now."

"I meant about Mildred, Mr. Steele," Laura said reprovingly. "It's got to be that other immortal, Lentz, who kidnapped her. We need to know more about him. Where he lives, what he does."

Steele nodded absently as he started making the tea. "Good plan," he agreed.

Laura sat down at Mildred's desk and switched the computer on. "So let's see if this machine here can help us any," she declared, her fingers dancing rapidly over the keyboard.

"Absolutely. One sugar or two?"

Laura chuckled. "Are you listening?"

"Of course, Miss Holt," Steele said courteously, bringing a cup of tea across and placing it in front of her. "There you are."

"Thanks." She took a drink and looked at him seriously. "You know, there's one advantage of this immortality thing."

Steele raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

"Sure there is," Laura nodded. "We can put some money in a bank, collect compound interest in two hundred years....money guaranteed."

It was Steele's turn to laugh. "Always presuming there'll be money around, Laura."

She shrugged. "There'll be something. But will there be jobs for two immortal private eyes in the year 2184?"

"There'll always be something to do," Steele said confidently. He went across to the tea-making things and began to make himself a cup. "Besides, there'll always be each other, won't there?"

Laura looked at him warily. "Will there?"

He turned, looking hurt. "Laura, is this another interrogation?"

"No, of course not," she responded. "But...when we reach our hundredth birthdays together....will you leave? What about our two hundredth? When are you going to grow tired of me?"

Steele picked up the sugar bowl and toyed with it absently. Then he looked at her sincerely. "Laura, the day I grow tired of you is the day I'll kneel down and let you take my head."

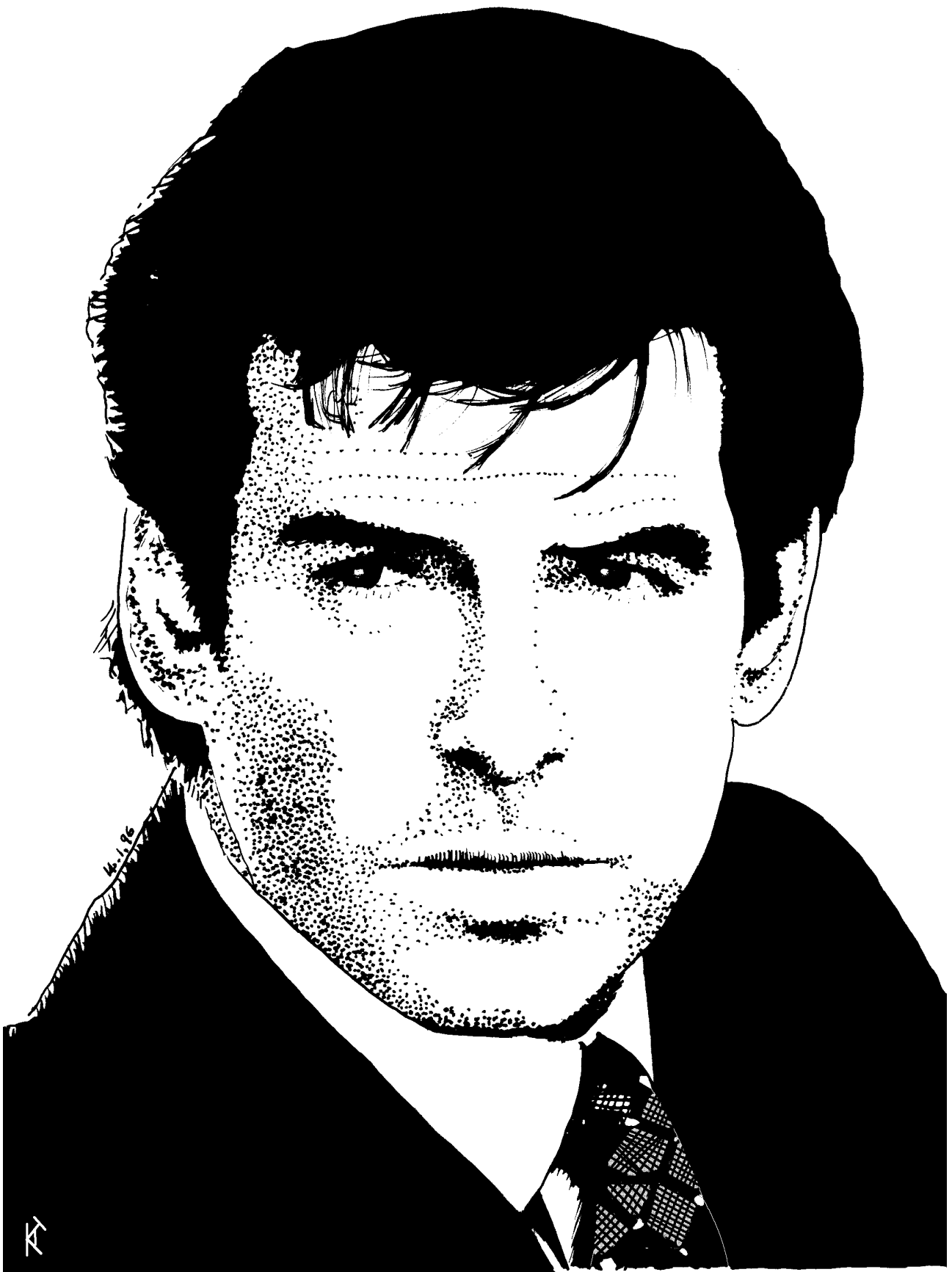
She smiled tiredly. "I wish I could believe that."

"Believe it," Steele said simply.

Laura looked at him. "Mr. Steele, you know -"

The computer screen erupted in flames with a roar, smoke curling towards the ceiling, the blast catching Laura right in the face. She was thrown back out of the chair to crash onto the floor unmoving. Steele dropped the sugar bowl and rushed over to her, feeling for a pulse. Her eyes were closed and he felt nothing; her clothes were shredded, and her skin blackened from the blast.

"Oh, Laura," Steele said sadly. Lifting her in his arms, he took her over to the couch and laid her



carefully down. Looking down at the still motionless body, Steele experienced a moment of frightening terror that the immortality thing had been a clever trick.

Then he felt something stirring inside Laura, something that echoed within his own frame. He touched her skin and withdrew hastily as a spark danced between her arm and his finger. Laura's chest heaved suddenly and she started to breathe again, irregularly and shallowly but definitely breathing. Steele's shoulders slumped with relief.

He looked back to where the smoking computer was beginning to die down and saw the black package resting at the base of the desk. It was on the opposite side of the desk from the agency entrance, so both he and Laura had missed it when they first entered. Crossing the office floor, Steele picked it up and opened it cautiously; he had no desire to experience the same thing as Laura.

The package contained a small guidebook for a department store, Hastings, in the centre of the city. Steele flicked through it absently, frowning; he could see no reason for it to be there. Then the last sentence on the last page caught his eye : ...and even today the owner of Hastings, Mr. Christopher Lentz, lives on the very top floor in his penthouse suite...

Steele looked at this sentence thoughtfully. Then he picked up the duelling sword and left the agency office.

★

"Here she is, my lord," Yevgeni announced as he entered the main room of the penthouse. Lentz turned and a satisfied smile spread across his thin face as Mildred was brought into the room, a dazed smile on her face. She had clearly been drugged, for Yevgeni's associate was having difficulty steering her properly.

"Excellent work, Yevgeni," Lentz noted. Dressed in a silk kimono, he was sitting on the sofa with one arm around Sarah, who was quietly reading a magazine without looking up. "Put her in the back room, we'll use her as a hostage."

"Yes, my lord," Yevgeni acknowledged, nodding to his associate.

Lentz rose. "I'm going to prepare. Steele and Miss Holt will undoubtedly be arriving shortly, in order to rescue their esteemed secretary. Have you found out anything more about Duncan Macleod?"

Yevgeni nodded. "His girlfriend's friend died of cancer today. They're preparing to go back home as we speak. Macleod spoke to Steele and Miss Holt earlier and presumably told them all the Rules. He hasn't had time to train them, though."

Lentz nodded. "Excellent. All right, I'm going to prepare. If Steele and Miss Holt turn up, show them in."

"Yes, my lord," Yevgeni nodded.

Lentz turned and walked through one of the pairs of double doors in the circular room. As the lock clicked, Yevgeni crossed to the sofa and seated himself beside Sarah. She looked at him without interest.

"Listen to me," Yevgeni said urgently, his Russian accent gone. "I've been working for the Agency. We need your help again."

Sarah's eyes widened. "The Agency? You people are the ones who -"

Yevgeni held up a hand to stop her. "I know, I know. We needed a way to distract Lentz, he was holding up our operation. It was unorthodox, but while he was searching for you we managed to shut down his gunrunning business. That bit's complete now, but we want to get you out permanently."

Sarah looked sad. "That's not possible."

"It is if you help," Yevgeni said persuasively. "Listen to me, Sarah. You used to be a damn good agent until Lentz got to you. We can set you free, make sure he never finds you again."

"Why should I want to leave?" she said listlessly. "I have everything I need here."

"You don't," Yevgeni scoffed. "You don't have your freedom. And you don't have your spirit anymore."

Sarah looked at him, and the Russian saw a flash of anger in her eyes. "Christopher provides everything for me now, Yevgeni."

"There. Anger. You're not entirely crushed. Sarah, come back. It's still not too late. We need you back with us, working for us. There are a lot of bad things happening in the world out there."

Sarah shook her head sadly. "No, Yevgeni. You go your way without me. I'm out of the business now."

★

She ached all over.

That was Laura's first thought as she opened her eyes. She was staring at the ceiling of the agency offices, lying on the couch at the side of the office, feeling oddly sticky as if someone had covered her in glue or something. She raised a hand and touched her cheek; her fingers came away slightly blackened. Rising, Laura looked at herself in a convenient mirror and gasped. Her hair had been singed, her skin blackened, and the front of her blouse ripped to shreds.

She remembered the computer exploding.

"Must have died again," she muttered to herself. She turned round, anger building. "Mr. Steele, where are you?"

Silence replied to her.

A splash of colour caught her eye suddenly; Laura crossed the office and picked up the guidebook for Hastings. She flicked through it absently, wondering where Steele had gone. Suddenly, she realised the duelling sword was also absent from the desk.

Before she could do anything, sensations shivered through her. Laura found it suddenly difficult to breath without concentrating; almost against her will, she turned to the entrance of the agency.

"Good morning," said Duncan Macleod.

Laura relaxed in relief. "Come in, Mr. Macleod."

Duncan entered. He looked at her askance. "What happened to you?"

Laura shrugged. "I died," she said simply, indicating the exploded computer terminal.

"My sympathies." Duncan looked around. "Where's Steele?"

"Gone off somewhere," Laura frowned. "Don't ask me where, because I don't know."

Duncan opened his trenchcoat. "I brought some presents."

He took two swords out from inside the coat, one older and one brand-new, both glinting sharply in the light from the office windows. Laura took the older one and looked at it, impressed; the blade was scratched and nicked as if through constant use, the grip worn by centuries of use.

"A Highlander's sword," Duncan said. "It belonged to a friend of mine a long time ago."

Laura hefted it. "It's heavy. Is it a claymore?"

"Not quite. It comes close." Duncan put the other sword, the new one, down on the desk. "And that's a fighting sabre. Rare."

"Thanks," Laura said sincerely.

"Has Lentz been around yet?" Duncan asked. "I asked a friend. He confirmed it. Lentz chooses the young, the inexperienced, those he thinks haven't learned to fight properly yet."

"People like me and Mr. Steele," Laura nodded.

"Yes."

She looked round the office and sighed. "I wish I knew where he was," she complained. "Our secretary's been kidnapped, our computer destroyed, and all that's left is this guide for some kind of department store."

Duncan's face hardened. "What store?"

"Hastings," Laura shrugged. She stared at him. "Is it important?"

Duncan nodded grimly. "Oh yes, it's important. Lentz owns and runs Hastings. Steele's gone to find him."

Laura's eyes widened. She picked up the highland sword and started for the exit. Duncan put a hand on her arm. "Wait. I should -"

"No!" Laura said, too sharply. Her expression softened. "No. Thank you, Mr. Macleod, but we all have to learn sometime. Mr. Steele and I have to fight our own battles." She looked around the agency. "Make yourself at home."

Without looking round, she left the offices. Duncan watched her go, then sighed and left as well. He had to pick up Tessa and go to the airport. One day, he mused, he would find out if they had survived.

He fervently hoped they would.

★

"Mr. Steele?"

Steele looked cautiously at the thin curly-haired man with a foreign accent of some kind. "That's right," he nodded. "I'm here to see Mr. Christopher Lentz."

Yevgeni nodded. "Mr. Lentz is waiting to see you, sir. If you'd come this way, please."

Steele followed him into the elevator and they started upwards. As they rose, Steele surreptitiously checked the duelling sword inside his coat. He wondered if he was going to see the sun rise the next day.

The lift stopped moving and, with a ping sound, the doors opened. Yevgeni stepped out first and courteously indicated for Steele to follow him. He did so, and they walked down a carpeted corridor

until they came to a big pair of double doors, wood-panelled and expensive. The mortal pushed them open and invited Steele inside.

The room beyond was circular, as expensively-furnished as the corridor from which Steele had just come. Sitting on a chair on the opposite side of the room, Christopher Lentz smiled at him. "Welcome, Mr. Steele. What do you think of my domicile?"

"A little rococo for my taste," Steele said lightly, "but nobody's perfect."

"No indeed." Lentz rose languidly, plucking his sword from the stand beside him. "I trust you've at least brought a weapon of some kind? I don't supply my opponents with their own swords."

Steele opened his coat and took out the duelling sword. Lentz smiled at it, obviously impressed. "A good sword. I was probably there when it was made, you know. I've lived for over five centuries."

"Soon to be middle-aged," Steele responded, stepping forward as he shed his coat. Lentz took a couple of steps closer, raising the sword.

"Let's begin," Lentz said, darting forward. Steele parried instantly, stepping to one side, and bringing his sword round to the side. Lentz's was already there and the blades clashed with a clang of metal and shower of sparks which dropped to the floor and vanished. Steele took a step back and Lentz advanced confidently, pressing him to respond with each cut and thrust. The room rang to the sounds of blades clashing.

Steele felt the wall behind his back as he retreated. Suddenly he ducked sideways and brought his blade round in a backhanded sweep, slashing Lentz across the shoulder. The German immortal made a growling noise and swiped absently at the blood which started to stain his shirt, then pressed home his attack. Steele was forced to stay on the defensive, parrying and dodging from Lentz's rapid strikes. The other's superior experience, after 500 years of fighting, was beginning to tell.

Ducking round the side of the chair, Steele turned and leapt up onto a table that was standing nearby. Lentz swiped at his legs and Steele jumped upwards, coming down with his feet on Lentz's shoulders. The German fell and Steele ran to the opposite side of the room, breathing heavily and taking the chance to rest. Lentz got to his feet, his eyes heavy with menace.

"You're good, for a novice," Lentz said.

Steele nodded. "Why, thank you."

"But that's no match for experience," Lentz growled, rushing forwards again. Their blades met but the momentum of Lentz's charge carried him crashing into Steele, who fell over. He rolled quickly to his feet, just in time to avoid a sweeping slash that would have cut him in two. A quick lunge was effortlessly parried by Lentz, who returned to the attack. Steele fell back, step by step, only able to defend and not get past Lentz's guard enough to attack. They reached the chair Lentz had been sitting on once again, and Steele retreated behind it to use it as protection.

"You can't hide forever, Mr. Steele," Lentz said, kicking the chair aside and slashing at him viciously.

"Who wants to live forever?" Steele responded lightly, parrying with some effort.

"You can't joke about it. You're weakening," Lentz snarled, proving his point with a thrust Steele only just managed to avoid.

"You're cheating..." Steele breathed. "You've had...five hundred years to practice." He ducked as Lentz's blade whistled past his neck, brought the duelling sword up to parry the return attack.

"So I am," Lentz agreed impassively, and his blade smashed into Steele with such force that it was torn out of Steele's hand. Lentz's sword bit deep into Steele's ribs, and pain rushed through him. Gasping, he dropped to his knees.

"Well, there we are," Lentz said. He pulled the sword out, eliciting a groan of pain from Steele. "You fought well."

The doors crashed open.

"Yevgeni, I said we were not to be disturbed!"

"I'm afraid you'll have to be," said a female voice, calm and steady but filled with strong emotion. Lentz and Steele turned towards the doors as Laura entered, wearing a clean blouse and jeans underneath a black bomber jacket. In one hand she carried the highland sword, the old but strong blade glinting steadily. Laura smiled at Lentz. "I know the rules, I won't intervene. But if you take Mr. Steele's head I'll come for you straight after."

Lentz looked down at Steele thoughtfully. "I see."

"So you'll have to fight me one way or the other," Laura said steadily.

Lentz shrugged. "Very well."

He turned away from Steele, who relaxed with a groan, and walked across the room to Laura. She looked up at him with quiet confidence and raised the sword so its blade touched his. Lentz smiled at her. "Are you ready to die, Miss Holt?"

"Not just yet," Laura said. "But then, I'm not planning to."

She lunged viciously and Lentz parried just in time. The air once again rang to the clash of sword blades, dancing almost faster than the eye could follow. Lentz was bigger and stronger, but Laura's sword was superior and she had the advantage of speed and agility over him. Steadily, step by step, she drove him back towards the table in the centre of the room.

"I'm impressed, Miss Holt," Lentz admitted, ducking round the table so it was between them, giving them both a breathing space. Hefting the highland sword warily, Laura watched him.

"I learn fast," she smiled. "Actually, I've done some sword-fighting before. Here and there, you know."

"Did Macleod help you?"

"No." Laura advanced again. "All my own work."

Lentz retreated from the table, and Laura leapt over it easily, returning to the attack. He parried her first thrust and lunged for her stomach, but she twisted aside and the blade bit at empty air only. Sweeping his sword aside, Laura slashed at his right arm, cutting across the nerves of the elbow. Lentz's fingers relaxed uselessly and the sword dropped to the ground as blood poured from the wound.

"Well, well," Laura said.

Staring at her, Lentz suddenly started for the doors. Laura turned with his movement, lifting and swinging the sword and shearing through his neck with one clean movement. The body stumbled and fell to the ground.

"Duncan did tell me one thing," she said to the motionless form. She raised her voice until the chamber echoed. "There can be only one!"

A glow suffused the decapitated Lentz's body and it began to crackle with grey sparks. Wind rushed through the chamber and energy began to flood out of Lentz into Laura. She staggered with each fresh onslaught, her hair streaming in the gale, her face bathed in white light, but remained upright as the Quickening tore into her, changing her, relining her neural paths, the essence of the dead immortal racing through her nerve centres. Fire overwhelmed her senses and she was floating, floating...

The glow vanished. Laura dropped to her knees, the sword skittering noisily across the floor. Exhaustedly, Steele pulled himself to his feet and retrieved both his and her blades, crossing over to her and crouching beside her. She looked up at him shakily.

"That felt...." she started, then stopped. "It felt...."

"It's all right," Steele said. "It's all right."

★

"Well, Mildred?"

Mildred looked at the exploded computer screen in horror. "How did it happen?"

"A bomb," Laura said. She folded her arms and looked at Steele. "It was a miracle neither of us were killed, wasn't it?"

"A miracle, Miss Holt," Steele agreed solemnly.

"Well, I don't know," Mildred sighed. "It'll cost money to replace all this."

"Money?" Steele repeated, wincing. "Oh."

"Oh, be brave, Mr. Steele," Laura admonished. "It's not that bad. At least we got out of it alive."

Steele sighed. "I suppose so. It's just that I set up this Agency to save money and now it's all going down the drain at once." He winced, looked down, and then up again. "Miss Holt, you're standing on my foot."

Laura looked down. "Oh yes, so I am, Mr. Steele." She smiled at him beatifically. "Sorry."

Steele sighed again. "That's all right. Do you think you could stop it as well?"

"Oh yes." Laura removed her foot.

"Thank you."

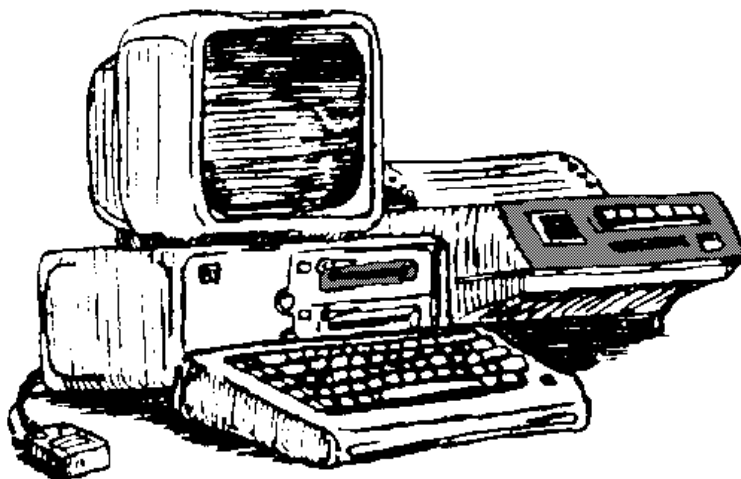
Mildred looked back at the computer again. "Well, it's a shame though, boss. This system was unique."

"We'll get you two systems," Laura promised. "I'm sure Mr. Steele will authorise the expense."

"No - one is all right," Mildred assured her. She waved her hand at the desk. "Look at the desk, anyway, Miss Holt. No space. There can be only one."

Laura and Steele looked at each other and collapsed in laughter.





Haiku For Katana

Light through a window.
Slim, straight sliver descending.
Reflection of death.

— Donna Kirking



The Long Sleep

Little dreamer,
woman-child so frail,
how could I know
when I knocked you down the years
that you would cling impulsively
to the man I would become?
I, ten years wearier,
your only link to the past:
a decade forfeit to coma,
all that was once yours
lost and forgotten:
you, my key to a mystery
ten years unsolved.

But They still lay in wait
with Their unearthly patience,
to pounce on your awakening,
making a tool of the dead
to strike the blow so long delayed.
Oh, little one,
fragile carefree runaway,
why did I delay?
Abused by expedience
They withered you,
stole your years away.
Now you sleep
the longest sleep of all.

—Kathryn Andersen

COLD FIRE

The second Inspector Crowley Tale

By KEV DAVIS

There were better ways to start the week. There were better ways to die.

Detective Sergeant Darkwood stared blankly at the corpse for a few seconds, nausea and terror battling for supremacy inside his head. A burned-out corpse was lying on its back next to the drinks machine, surrounded by an uneven pile of thin black ash. A terrible stench of charred flesh filled the air, along with a repulsive acrid smoke, and Darkwood covered his mouth with his free sleeve in an attempt to ward it off.

The cadaver's crisp blue shirt bore a jagged, blackened hole around the stomach area, and the exposed midriff of the victim had suffered a nauseatingly similar wound. Through the sickening pall of smoke rising from the body, an actinic green-blue flame was visible, burning fiercely in the pit of the corpse's stomach.

Darkwood narrowed his streaming, red-rimmed eyes, and choked his way back through the stinging fumes. There was an efficient whirring from above, and the sprinklers hissed into life. As the detective sank to the blackened carpet, more through lack of higher brain functions than any conscious attempt to escape the smoke, the artificial rain did its best to wash away the evidence.

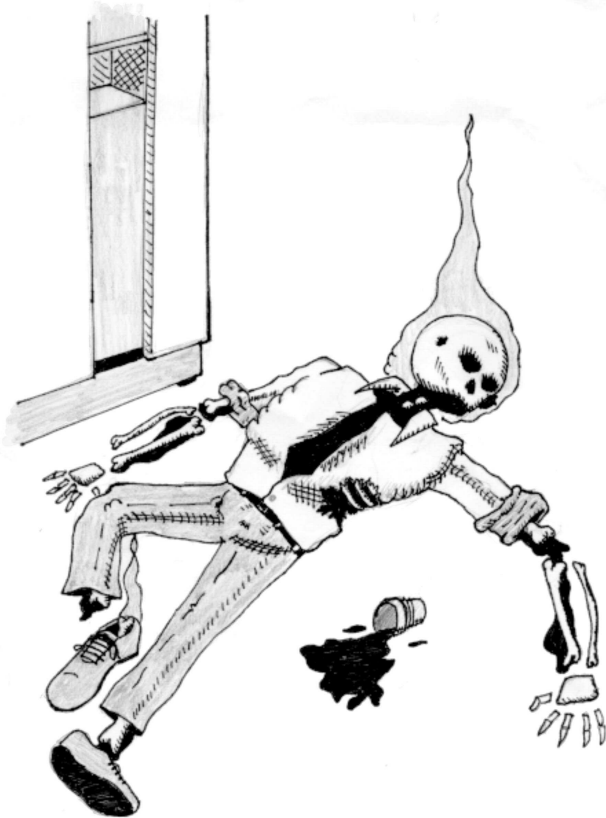
★

DS Black's lighter hovered warily in the air for a moment, inches from the tip of an unlit cigarette. The smoker frowned slightly, and flicked the lighter off. The clean orange flame died. The wailing fire alarm grumbled into silence.

"Well," said Black, removing the cigarette from his mouth and tucking it neatly into his jacket pocket. "I must say I applaud the station's new anti-smoking scheme. A mite close to overkill, perhaps, but I can see it working."

He screeched the window into a closed position, and strode back over to his desk, collapsing expertly into his shiny leather chair. "Very efficient, anyway," he said, obviously impressed, "How's it done, then, Crowley? Tiny hidden smoke sensors? Infra- red? Magic?"

Detective Inspector David Crowley looked up from his computer. He sniffed the air thoughtfully. "Coincidence," was his verdict. The Newcomer winced a bit as he detected the faint scent of cooked meat hanging in the air. "Canteen staff have burnt something. Can't you smell it?"



Stephen Black warily inhaled deeply through the nose, but, being a mere human, and a human with a rather bad cold at that, failed to register anything. "No," he said. "Not the sausages, is it?" he added, with a vague trace of concern.

Crowley had wandered over to the CID office door. He pushed it open about a complaining hinge, and, poking his head out into the corridor, gave a few critical sniffs.

He froze, his face swiftly claimed by nausea, and his irises faded to a terrified shade of grey.

Black rightly thought something to be amiss. "What is it?"

"Charred flesh," said Crowley, disappearing purposefully out into the corridor. "Tenctonese."

"Could well be the sausages, then," mumbled Black to nobody, looking for his notebook.

★

Keith Darkwood croaked and spluttered helplessly in the car park of Vyse Street police station, taking in the thinly polluted Birmingham air and hoping it'd do him some good. He waved his unbandaged arm at DI Morgan, who'd helped him stagger out of the station into slightly healthier environs.

"I'll be fine," he said, falteringly, although his heart clearly wasn't in it.

"You're sure you're alright?"

Keith coughed horribly. The mild toxic poisoning had given him a skin tone that was rather more pallid and yellow than it usually was, and his left arm was firmly bandaged after a knife wound of weeks previous. If mummified Egyptian corpses had worn dark suits and sported untidy haircuts, Darkwood could have mingled with the best of them.

"As alright as I ever get," he croaked. He looked up as Crowley emerged from the station, fiddling absently with his portable phone. Despite the chill October wind, the Tenctonese detective was casually wearing a thin short-sleeved shirt. David Crowley was one of some two-thousand Newcomer slaves bred to labour in sub-zero temperatures - most of them had moved over to Britain soon after arriving on the planet.

"Just been talking to the Newcomer department at Birmingham General," he explained, waggling the cellphone as if proof were required. He joined Darkwood and Morgan. "It's nothing serious, apparently. They think you probably just inhaled..." Crowley followed this up with a rather strange noise, which seemed to involve the use of his nasal passages at some point. He made a wretched sort of face.

"Was that the name of a Newcomer chemical, or a sneeze?" said Darkwood warily.

"A sneeze," sniffed Crowley, and rubbed at his nose. "I have a cold," he explained. The sub-zero Newcomers had proved particularly susceptible to the current strain that was touring the British Isles. Darkwood found it all vaguely amusing.

"Be careful, then," said he, waggling a finger in admonishment. "That's what got the Martians, in the end."

"Really?" said Morgan, doubtfully, "I thought it was just general Earth bacteria that killed them?"

"The common cold," insisted Darkwood, with little conviction.

Crowley's eyes narrowed. "What are you two talking about?" he asked, somewhat cautiously.

"Earth was invaded by Martians back in '53," said Darkwood, in all seriousness. "Landed over in New Jersey, they did. Grover's Mill. Big metal spaceships, heat rays and stuff. Wiped out by the common cold, in the end. Surely you heard about that?"

David stared blankly at Darkwood for a few seconds, and tried to decide if this was a joke or not. It was something of an old tradition between Crowley and Darkwood, this, started back in '92, the year they'd both joined the force. Neither of them had known anything about the other's culture, back then. Sat killing time in the station canteen, Crowley had jokingly claimed that he could digest polystyrene cups. Keith had effortlessly responded with dire warnings about the alligators that lived in Birmingham's canal system, and the game was born. Scoring any points in it had become more and more difficult over the past six years, of course, but Crowley was still winning by a clear two dozen.

"Piffle," accused Crowley, the standard response. He pointed a dramatically wavering finger at Darkwood, who nodded guiltily.

"Anyway. It looks as if you inhaled a bit of ackhian," said David, looking through his biroed notes.

He glanced up at Darkwood, who was obviously on the brink of asking whether that was another sneeze or not. Crowley didn't give him the chance. He plunged on.

"It's a chemical produced by the mata gland in adult gannaums, evidently thrown out when the body was burning - that should explain the greenish flame, anyway. The chemical's slightly toxic to humans, if directly inhaled, but not too serious. You'll be fine in an hour or two."

"Splendid," said Darkwood weakly.

"Any news on what actually happened to Paul, incidentally?" said Morgan. Paul Bearer was the Newcomer police officer currently lying next to the drinks machine looking like the aftermath of an overly enthusiastic barbecue. After the air had been cleared, a group of forensics had turned up to peer critically at the cinders. They'd been shrugging at each other, more than anything.

Crowley shook his head bleakly. "Nothing yet," he said. "The sprinklers have apparently ruined the crime scene a bit. They think it was probably a welding torch or something, that got him, though; the ribcage has actually been reduced to ashes. A normal fire wouldn't get anywhere near the temperature required there, not in the time it had to do its work in."

"Even crematoria can't completely reduce corpses to ash," commented Darkwood, throwing in a bit of morbid trivia from his collection. "They have to grind the bones down afterwards."

Crowley shrugged, and flipped away his notebook. "You're sure you didn't see anybody else there, though?" he asked.

There was an almost audible click as Darkwood's sarcasm switched on. "Oh, now you come to mention it, yes," sneered Darkwood. "Yes. There was a bloke holding a damn great welding torch to Paul's stomach. He had a couple of bloody great acetylene tanks with him, so he probably ran off quite quickly."

He was beginning to sympathise with the general public, who were invariably unimpressed when CID turned up and asked them to repeat what they'd just explained at length to the uniformed officers. "Nobody else was there. I have said this already," he added, bitterly. "Twice."

"There was a lot of smoke about - you're sure you didn't see anyone?"

"Yes," said Darkwood, pointedly. "I'm sure."

Crowley shrugged, and decided to await the official forensic verdict. "Back to the office, then," he said. He glanced at Darkwood, who still looked unnervingly like a plague victim in a shirt and tie. "If you're up to it."

Keith shrugged non-committally, and awkwardly adjusted his sling. "I'm never up to it," he grumbled. The three detectives headed for the door.

★

DS Black spluttered in loud disgust, and spat a mouthful of tea into - more through luck than judgement - the nearby wastebin. Normally a black-coffee drinker, he'd opted for a milk-and-sugar darjeeling when the drinks machine had denied him his usual. He couldn't see himself making that mistake again.

"I don't know how you can drink this stuff," he scowled, raising the flimsy plastic cup as Darkwood strode into the office. "Nice tan, by the way," he added. "Chernobyl, was it?"

Darkwood grinned sarcastically at Stephen, and plucked the tea from his desk. "Darjeeling?" he mused. Black nodded.

"I've got ackhian poisoning, or something," grumbled Darkwood, and swigged back a mouthful of the brew. He would have gone on to comment on Paul Bearer's unpleasant death and make some sneezing jokes, but had a sudden and rather dramatic urge to empty his mouth. The contents of the wastebin received another rain of unwanted darjeeling.

"Ye gods," he spat, wiping his tongue on the back of his hand and wincing horribly. He carefully placed the demon cup on Black's desk. "What the hell is that?"

"Drinks machine tea, so I'm told." Stephen regarded the drink with a wary terror. "Shall we bag it for forensic?"

Darkwood ran his tongue over his teeth, and grimaced weakly. "Perhaps."

Crowley and Morgan entered the office, nodding a greeting to the reluctant tea-drinkers and heading for their desks.

David sniffed the air quizzically, and joined Darkwood and Black at the latter's desk. He peered down at the mysterious cup of tea through darkening irises, and glanced dubiously up at the two human detectives.

"Do either of you want this?" he asked.

Black and Darkwood shook their heads fearfully. "It's bloody poisoned, or something," was Black's conspiratorial view of the whole thing. He leaned back in his chair and made with the paranoid glances.

"Nonsense," said Crowley. He picked up the cup and drained it in a couple of swigs. Black and Darkwood looked on with open incredulity. "Nothing wrong with it," was David's verdict, and he crumpled the cup into a jagged plastic mess, dropping it neatly into the bin. "A bit warm, perhaps," he added, with a shrug. Given the preference, British Newcomers preferred their drinks cold.

Stephen and Keith exchanged mystified looks.

"The milk's just a bit sour," explained Crowley, with a shrug, returning to his desk. He frowned at the random scattering of papers for a while, his irises swirling through the darker corners of the spectrum. A quick shake of the head cleared it. "The drinks machine in question was probably overlooked this morning," he added, by way of an explanation.

"Ah."

"All the better for us lot, anyway. Think I'll nip down and mark it—" Crowley suddenly gave an impressive sneeze, which faded away into some depressed muttering. "Damn this cold," he grumbled, sniffing. He wrenched open his desk drawer and fished out a tiny cardboard box emblazoned with the word "Ecrudex" in bold green letters. On its front was a silhouetted side-view of an unmistakably Tenctonese head, the nose and throat highlighted in a dramatically bright shade of orange.

"Cold cure, is that?" mused Black, doing his bit of police deduction for the day.

"Apparently," said Crowley. "The latest thing from the boys and girls at Diamos Pharmaceuticals. Haven't you seen the ad?"

Darkwood looked up. "Not that one with the flu-suffering Newcomer talking to the pretty young hospital receptionist, is it?" He'd sat there and watched it a few times, trying vainly to work out what the Tenctonese conversation translated to. "Where she slaps him?"

"Because he asks if he can see the doctor, yes. It's a terrible joke, really."

"Joke?" said Darkwood doubtfully.

"Well, I use the word 'joke' in its loosest sense," said David. He slid a finger underneath the cardboard flap of the box, and tugged out a foil-covered tray of brightly-coloured pills. "It really only works in Tenctonese, anyway, which is why they didn't bother dubbing an English version of it."

"Plus, of course, the drug's fatal to humans," commented Morgan cheerfully. "And the purchasing power of potential suicides must be fairly minimal, if only from a brand loyalty viewpoint."

"Fatal?" said Darkwood fearfully.

"Well, it can be," said Morgan. "The drug's rigged for the Tenctonese physiology, so it's rather too powerful for humans. One Ecrudex is roughly equal to three-hundred paracetamol, I think."

"Ah," said Keith, not a little warily. He peered across the room at the tiny orange pills. Hard to imagine that such innocent looking things could be so dangerous. "Thanks for the tip."

Somebody cleared their throat, in the theatrical manner employed only to get attention. Four heads turned to face the door to the DCI's office. Crowley, who'd been rather enjoying his temporary position of authority these past few weeks, groaned silently. DCI Richard Chesterton was back.

"Morning all," said that very man, smiling falsely and wagging a beige cardboard folder at the world. "We have a new case. Who's not doing anything?"

Darkwood remained silent, and gestured grimly at his computer screen. A fiendish-looking piece of spreadsheet software glowed out at him. He still hadn't forgiven Stephen for mentioning that he, Darkwood, could type adequately with just his right hand.

Black grinned vaguely. "I've got some leads to follow up on the pub burglaries," he said, looking smug. A couple of the local drinking houses had lost a few barrels and bottles in recent weeks. He glanced over at an empty desk. "Smith's got some house-to-house planned for Greenwood, I think."

"Crowley? Morgan?"

The two detectives shrugged blankly. "Nothing that can't wait," said the first. He raised what passed for his eyebrows, and rose from his chair. "What have we got, then?"

"A suspicious death in a house out in the suburbs," said Chesterton.

"How so?"

"A Newcomer burned to death in his living room some time last night, down Harborne way," shrugged the DCI. "Possibly just an accident with

a cigarette or something; we're not sure. SOCO's on the scene as we speak - take a look at it, if you would."

"On our way," said Crowley. He patted his pockets experimentally, and sighed in defeat. Half a mile away, Maelstrom the goldfish peered at David's car keys through the glass of his bowl. A mile or so in the other direction, a garage mechanic sat on the bonnet of David's car, drank his third tea of the morning and looked at the pictures in his newspaper.

"You're driving, then, Morgan."

★

"Sorry," said Crowley bleakly, wiping the dashboard with his handkerchief. He sniffed wretchedly, and surveyed the spattered plastic surface. He dabbed at it further. "Sorry," he said again.

"I thought Newcomers just blinked a lot when they had a cold," said Morgan, with evidently point-less optimism.

"Normally yes," said Crowley. He produced another handkerchief from a pocket and polished the dashboard back to its former glory. "This particular strain seems to be bringing out the worst in us, though."

"Oh."

The Fiat drew to a halt in Ferncliffe Road, finding a space between a squad car and an ambulance. Crowley clambered from the passenger door and took in a lungful of suburban air. Situated upwind from the industrial centre of Birmingham, the usual thin trace of pollutants was absent. Crowley rather missed it.

A few dozen straggly trees rose from muddy circles of soil at the roadside, determinedly hanging onto a few leaves despite the closing of the year. Identical semi-detached houses sat behind identical front gardens, bordered with oppressively tall and sturdy hedges.

"Nice place," said Morgan, emerging from her side of the car. Her breath clouded opaquely in the chill October air. Crowley's didn't.

"Not bad for a Newcomer, anyway," he conceded, with a half-impressed shrug. Crowley and Morgan approached the scene of the potential crime. It wasn't terribly inconspicuous - uniformed officers stood around in the garden looking purposeful, and an ambulance crew was emerging dejectedly from the front door. The crackle of police radios broke the otherwise peaceful morning.

Crowley made his way into 37 Ferncliffe Road, pausing only to sneer at the pebble-dashing. Morgan followed him in.

She sniffed the air momentarily, and didn't flinch. It was marginally more unpleasant than the station canteen after an overcooked lamb curry had been perpetrated, but bearable.

Crowley nearly vomited. He gagged and retched, eventually covering his grimacing mouth with a soiled handkerchief. Disgusted, muffled mumblings made themselves heard through the cloth.

"Morning sir, ma'am," said the scene-of-crime officer, who was stood in the living room with a clipboard and a doubtful sort of expression.

As the detectives strolled through into the room, Morgan's reaction to events was suddenly as bad as

Crowley's. Sprawled in an armchair facing the television was the owner of the house, or at least what remained of him. The majority of his torso was a hollow, blackened wreck, and his limbs had suffered horrific burns. A bulbous Tenctonese skull lolled grimly to one side on the headrest, the flesh toasted cleanly away from the bone.

The whole scene was illuminated with a faintly purplish light. Morgan turned to the bay windows in the front wall, and regarded the dark pink coating on the glass. She shuddered involuntarily.

Crowley had since overcome his nausea and was warily examining the corpse. He mumbled incoherently, grinned faintly beneath his mask and briefly removed the handkerchief from his mouth and nose. "What's your theory?" he croaked.

The forensic pointed to the coffee table in the centre of the room. Next to a half-empty milk bottle was a half-full ashtray. Beneath the light covering of greasy cinder that had fallen throughout the room, a few cigarette stubs were visible.

"We're going for 'carelessness', at the moment," said the SOCO, shrugging. "Fell asleep with a cigarette in his hand, and burnt himself to death. Seems likely enough."

Morgan smiled knowingly, and nodded in a prompting fashion at Crowley. She got a blank look in return. "What?" said David, suspiciously.

"Newcomers don't smoke, remember?" she said. It was true; nicotine could have very unfortunate effects on the Tenctonese. DS Black often had to waft his cigarette smoke out of the office window if he didn't want to witness the spectacle of Crowley coughing his lungs up.

"Er," said Crowley. "Er, yes. We do, actually."

"You do?"

"Afraid so. We react badly to tobacco smoke, of course, but there's all sorts of other rubbish we can attack our lungs with," explained David. He looked almost apologetic.

"Oh."

Crowley turned to the forensic. "Any sign of anyone else having been in the house?" he asked. The SOCO shook his head.

"No," he said, "Mr. de Fey apparently lived on his own; there's no sign of a forced entry, and the carpet of ash hadn't been disturbed when we got here. We'll have to take a closer look to be sure, but I don't think we're looking at a murder."

"Most likely an accidental death, then?" said Morgan, asking rather than suggesting.

"Either that or a very level-headed suicide," shrugged the forensic. "There's no sign of any traditional accelerants being used; once we've done the toxicology and our Tenctonese expert has ruled out the chemicals given off by a burning Newcomer body, we'll see what we've got left."

"Hmm," said Crowley. "But you think it's possible that this was all caused by a careless cigarette?" he asked, waving a hand at the carbonized remains of the Newcomer. It did seem a bit unlikely, really. Even DS Black managed to wake up when he dropped a lit cigarette on his trousers.

"Very probably, we suspect," nodded the forensic. "There's an empty milkbottle on the table - he

was probably too drunk to do anything about the fire when it started."

"You're sure the fire was the cause of death, then?" wondered Morgan, who liked to wonder things like that. "Not a cover-up for a more betraying form of murder, perhaps?"

"Difficult to be sure," shrugged the SOCO. "As I say, once we've had a better look, we should be able to find out if anyone else had been in the house. The actual cause of death is rather harder to check - as you can see, the corpse has been torched almost completely. Again, we'll have to wait before we can rule out the use of an unknown accelerant. There are some pretty weird chemicals in the ash, but -" he grinned bleakly at David, "you blokes have got some pretty weird chemicals in you to begin with."

Crowley glanced up from the blackened cadaver and smiled faintly at the forensic officer. "Well, I'll leave you to get on with it," he said.

The SOCO nodded, and returned to his work. Crowley and Morgan strode from the ash-covered living room of the late Mr. de Fey.

★

DS Black rose awkwardly from the pavement, and groggily span around, trying to focus. He pressed his hand to his nose, which was hurting like hell, and he wouldn't have been vastly surprised to learn that it was broken. His palm came away with blood on it, and the detective groaned.

"Right," he said, wagging a threatening finger at Rob Erbank. His voice carried a nasty mix of anger and determination, and he was doing his best to restrain himself from taking revenge. It was probably a good thing that the British police didn't carry guns, at least in the case of this particular officer. "You're bloody nicked, you are," added Black. He fumbled clumsily through his pockets in search of handcuffs. "And don't bloody try anything, either."

Erbank, a tall, gruff-looking Newcomer, eyed Black with distaste. In his left hand he held a sturdy "Milk is Thine Enemy" placard, which now had a colourful streak of human blood running across it. There was an organisation behind all this, apparently; the Arcleacley Group, religiously campaigning that sour milk did unhelpful things to the Tenc-tonese soul. Posters had been going up in prominent places throughout the city, and they'd staged some sort of protest march outside a brewery last week.

Black has turned up to the Cooper's Arms on his pub-crawl burglary investigations, only to find Erbank standing by the door acting as an unofficial bouncer for any Newcomers who fancied a swift half. Stephen's attempt to sort matters out had gone rather badly, as his bleeding nose testified.

"Handcuffs, handcuffs," muttered the detective under his breath, as if the mantra would summon the things into existence within his pockets. It failed to work, as ever, and they remained firmly in his desk drawer. He swore a bit, and grappled with his radio.

"Backup requested at the Cooper's Arms, Nightingale Road," said Black numbly, speaking into his radio. "A Newcomer's just..."

A placard clattered to the pavement. Stephen groaned inwardly, and looked up. Further along the pavement, Erbank was climbing into a car. Black dithered awhile before clambering into his own. He battled with the ignition.

"...buggered off, the bastard. He's driving a dark red..." Black squinted at the escaping car, which was now speeding off in the direction of the city centre. Not being a great expert on cars, Stephen faltered. "A dark red estate," he concluded, lamely. "Didn't get the number. Am in pursuit. Assistance required."

The engine of Black's Cortina coughed unhealthily. He gave up on the ignition, and awarded the dashboard a few angry thumps. Violence was his usual method of attempted engine repair, despite the system's poor track record. That and swearing.

"Bastard bastard bastard," he observed, punching the steering wheel and rattling it about angrily. The car sat there in with a sullen lack of enthusiasm. One of the more arcane dashboard lights gave a few half-hearted blinks, and the defunct car-stereo gurgled quietly. "You're doing this on bloody purpose, aren't you?"

There was a moment of silence. "I'm sorry?" said a hesitant voice on his radio.

"Ah. Sorry. Wasn't talking to you," he said, grinning weakly for all the good it would do him.

"Oh, and correction, control," he added, with a sigh. The air condition made a sniggering sort of rasping noise. "Am no longer in pursuit."

★

"A dark red Volvo, Newcomer driver?" Darkwood said to his radio. He was stood on the pavement just down the road from the station, carrying a six-pack of fizzy drink. After the nasty experience with the tea this morning, Darkwood's deep distrust of the station's vending machines had fallen to lower and bleaker levels. Black's latest jokey conspiracy theory was that PC Bearer had died after drinking a cup of the infamous vending machine oxtail soup, and Keith wasn't taking any chances.

"Yes," said the voice of the conspiracy theorist himself, via the lower echelons of the electromagnetic spectrum. "Big bloke. Forehead like a barcode."

"He's here," said Darkwood. Parked at the currently-red traffic lights was a the car in question, Robert Erbank idly drumming his fingers on the dashboard and peering nervously into his rear-view mirror.

"What, in the office?" said Black, but Keith wasn't listening. He'd clumsily slipped a can of cola from its plastic-ringed container and was deftly sloshing it from side to side as he approached the car. The lights were still red. Darkwood tapped cheerily on the passenger window with his free hand. Erbank glanced over at him distractedly. There was a dull whirr as the Newcomer thumbed the relevant button and the glass slid downwards.

"Clean your windscreen, sir?" said Keith, peering in at the driver. There was a clunk, a hiss, and Robert Erbank received an unexpected faceful of thoroughly-shaken fizzy drink. Sugar, water, caffeine, numerous mysterious chemicals with num-

bers for names, and - most importantly - lots of carbon dioxide.

As the sticky brown liquid dribbled down the Newcomer's suddenly blank face, Darkwood reached in and unlocked the door. Erbank fumbled groggily with the gearstick, before losing most of his consciousness and collapsing forward onto the steering wheel.

The horn blared. Darkwood grinned.

★

"Three crates of White Gold and a barrel of..."

Phil the barman shrugged. "Glihab something," he concluded, and glowered pointedly at a Newcomer who'd just slunk in through the now unguarded doorway. "Some cheap slag muck."

"Glihablazichni?" hazarded DS Black, looking up from his laptop. There were really only four major brands of sour milk, and, after a week of inquiries on the pub thefts, he'd very nearly got to the point where he could pronounce them all.

"Probably," yawned Phil, who was a bit xenophobic and couldn't really care less. "I only stock it on the brewery's orders."

Black tapped away at the keyboard of his computer, producing a few efficient bleeps and whirrs. "And just the one barrel, you say?"

"It's all I had."

Stephen nodded, and stabbed at his laptop's keypad. "No alcohol stolen, though?" he added.

Phil shook his head. "Not a drop," he said. "God knows why they didn't help themselves to the whisky or something; sour milk's virtually bloody worthless compared to some of the stuff I've got down there."

That had been the case in several of the recent pub burglaries, and Black was beginning to suspect that a Tenctonese gang was stocking up. A couple of pubs had lost some alcohol, but that was probably just a half-hearted attempt to cover things up. Every burglary had taken place in pubs that stocked Tenctonese drinks, and the cellars had been emptied of sour milk in each case.

The two humans looked up as a Newcomer joined them at the bar. She cleared her throat. "We've only got canned," said the barman, in the surliest voice he could manage.

"Fine," said Kathryn Wheel, and sniffed a bit. Phil took a half-litre can of White Gold from the shelves behind him, and thumped it onto the bartop.

"One ninety-eight," he announced gruffly, and Kathryn handed him a couple of pound coins. Phil wandered off to the till, grumbling.

Black smiled weakly at Kathryn. He was always vaguely uncomfortable around Tenctonese women. He'd once misread a pregnant male Newcomer's gender and such memories always unnerved him when he met a linnaum. It was the lack of hair, as well; at least his fellow humans had some sort of distinguishing cranial decoration, rather than - it seemed to him - an unreadable random spattering of pigment.

Oh, and there was their third sex as well, of course, just to make things even worse.

"Got a cold, have you?" he said, eventually, not being able to come up with any better conversation openers.

"Er, yes," said Kathryn. "Can't seem to shift it."

"Hmm," Black tried to look sympathetic, but didn't really have the face for it. "Have you tried Ecrudex?" he asked.

Kathryn nodded, seeming surprised that a human would suggest it. "I took a few this morning, yes. They've cleared it a bit, but it's still there," she said, and sniffed again.

Black gave one of his typical funny-old-world shrugs. "A man on the moon yet we can't cure the common cold," he said, hopelessly.

"Superluminal spacecraft translocation and we can't either," said Kathryn. "What hope is there?"

"What hope indeed."

Barman Phil returned from the till, bearing tuppence. He slid it across the bartop, slaloming it through a few sticky rings of spilt alcohol.

"There," he said, still surly.

"Thank you," said Kathryn, and pocketed the coin. She levered open the ringpull of her drink and took a mouthful of sour milk. Black smiled weakly, trying to ignore the unpleasant smell.

"Well, I must be off," said the linnaum, picking up her bag from the bartop. "Nice talking to you."

"Likewise," said DS Black, somewhat surprised.

"See you again, perhaps."

"Perhaps."

He sat on his stool in a thoughtful and somewhat dazed silence, watching Kathryn walk out of the pub door. Strange thoughts sailed through the detective's brain. It had been a while since a female of any species had shown any interest in him. Usually his deeply suspicious and conspiratorial brain put paid to any attempt at a proper relationship. That and a somewhat grim face that looked very much at home in front of a suspicious and conspiratorial brain.

He looked up at Phil, who looked as if he'd just finished saying something.

"Hmm?" said Black warily.

"I said, is that it? Are you done?"

"What?" He pulled himself together. "Oh. Yes. No problem. Thanks for your time." He tapped distractedly at his laptop for a few seconds, before clicking it shut and rising from his barstool. "Cheerio," he said vaguely, heading for the door.

"Here, don't I get an insurance reference?" called Phil. Black turned around.

"Hmm? Bugger, yes. Sorry," He folded his laptop open again, and began stabbing angrily at its tiny keyboard. "Won't be a minute," he said.

Phil went off to polish a few glasses, while Stephen battled helplessly with his portable computer. He squinted into its printer slot and prodded at it with the sharp end of his biro.

There was a scream from outside, and the detective looked up, his face vanishing into a shadow. It had been a female scream. Certain pessimistic areas of Black's brain were making pretty good guesses as he sprinted clumsily out into the street.

"Control to all units," said Black's radio, lying unregarded on the bartop next to his computer. "Assault reported on Nightingale Road. Please respond."

Phil looked slowly to the door, shrugged, and went back to polishing a glass.



★

"341 to control," said Morgan. "Crowley and myself are on our way to the scene of assault." Her partner sniggered weakly at the irony, and regarded the gridlocked rush hour traffic.

"Where are we, anyway?" he queried, sitting up and giving the scenery his attention.

"Bristol Street, I think."

"Oh," said the Newcomer, taking a quick look at his mental map of the city. "It's just down the end of the road, then. I'll get out and walk. See you whenever."

He tugged at a likely-looking handle on the door. The window squeaked down a few inches.

"It's that one," said Morgan wearily, pointing to another handle on the inside of the passenger door. "Unless you're trying to be dramatic and exciting."

"No," said Crowley, pushing open the passenger door and thudding it against the car next to Morgan's Fiat. He squeezed out through the slim gap it afforded him, and wondered if he'd have been better off climbing out of the window in the first place. "No, not quite my style. I could sprint over the car rooftops, though, if you like."

"Just do your job, Crowley."

"Sorry."

★

In the shadows of thought, a night-black shape opened its eyes. It stretched its tattered wings and blinked pensively at its unfamiliar environs. A jagged mouth frowned uneasily. A hesitant talon prodded invisible walls.

Something was different. The darkness of this mind was tinged with strange, new colours. Something had gone wrong.

The dark wraith gently closed its eyes. It would wait.

It had little choice.

★

Black grappled numbly for a radio that wasn't there, planning to call an ambulance that wouldn't have helped. Kathryn Wheel was lying face-up on the grimy pavement, a large section of her torso burnt clean away. Varying-coloured flame guttered in the pit of her stomach, and Stephen pulled off his jacket. He patted it against the blackened mess, extinguishing the half-hearted blaze.

Stephen lapsed into a vaguely automatic police response, ordering the assembled crowd of passers-by to keep their distance. "Did anyone see anything?" he heard himself say, warily scanning line-of-sight windows for bizarrely-armed snipers.

This is just bloody typical, he thought. Bloody typical. Thanks very much, whoever's running the universe. Someone shows half an interest in me for once, and they get struck by bloody lightning ten seconds later. DS Black glowered up at the sky, half-expecting to see a tiny thundercloud scudding back to the gods now that its job had been done. Bastards. He shook a fist at the overcast sky. A few pigeons croaked back at him.

A heavy hand clapped Black on the shoulder. "Are you alright, Steve?" It was Crowley.

Black's gaze returned from its baleful examination of the heavens, alighted briefly on the concerned face of DI Crowley, and fell to Kathryn's blasted corpse. "No," he said. "No, I'm bloody well not."

"Did you know her?" said David, carefully.

"No," Black shook his head. "Probably not." He grimaced vaguely and took in a deep lungful of inner-city air, trying to purge the fog that had suddenly claimed his brain.

David looked down at the dead Newcomer, and lifted Stephen's smoking jacket. He grimaced, and took up a thoughtful look. The stomach area had been charred to cinders in a similar way to that of Bearer and de Fey - something was going on here.

He was sure there was a Tenc-tonese legend about this sort of thing, somewhere. There was a Tenc-tonese legend for pretty much everything, if you knew where to look. He'd have to ask Morfran about this one.

David shook his head vaguely. "Should be able to get a tissue scan, anyway," he decided. "Have you got your computer with you?"

Black gave a weak, hopeless shrug, not taking his eyes off the dead Tenc-tonese woman. "It's, er," he sighed, "It's back in the pub." A vague and needless gesture indicated where the Cooper's Arms was. "Sorry."

"So," he said, and glanced up at the assembled crowd. Their attention was currently divided between him and the corpse, according to their individual ideas of street entertainment. If any of the audience had been responsible for the death of Kathryn Wheel, presumably they'd long gone.

Black turned to Crowley, and groggily rubbed a hand over his stubbled chin. He scratched his nose. "Probably best if we, er, commandeered the pub to take statements, sir," he said. "I assume DI Morgan's on her way?"

David nodded. "I'll see if we can rustle up a few plods, as well," he said. "You get the body sorted, I'll organise the statements."

"Be with you in a minute," said Black. "Oh, and look after these," he added, pushing a half-empty packet of cigarettes and a lighter into his superior's hand. "I can't face them."

Crowley turned to the crowd of onlookers, and began politely shouting at them. Detective Sergeant Stephen Black headed back to the pub for his computer. And - forget the rules - a big, big drink.

★

"We've got a dozen witnesses who saw you hit DS Black with the placard - even if you *did* think he was a member of the public, you're still breaking the law," growled DS Darkwood, playing the less pleasant half of the nice-cop-nasty-cop cliché for all it was worth. He'd untied and untidied his hair, and had placed a cigarette between his sneering lips. He had made to light it a few times during the interview, but had flown off on an angry tangent every time. DC Smith sat next to him, looking attentive and concerned.

"We've also got tissue traces on the placard," he added, with a scowl. "And the boys at the lab have matched them up with your DNA profile. So don't-" The non-smoker waggled his unlit cigarette at Robert Erbank, "don't think for a minute that you'll get away with this."

Darkwood gave a final sneer and leaned back in his plastic chair, awaiting Erbank's response. He really, really hoped he wouldn't have to light the cigarette.

Robert turned to his duty brief - Jonah Varque, a smartly-dressed middle-aged Newcomer who had the arrogant look of an Overseer about him - and raised a hairless eyebrow. Varque nodded carefully, and Erbank turned slowly back to face the two detectives.

"I didn't realise he was a police officer," he said, without emotion, in more or less exactly the same

manner he'd said it in three minutes ago. "And I have no further comment."

"You're not bloody-" Darkwood began, sitting up.

"My client has nothing to say on the matter, unless you wish to reduce the charge to ABH," said Varque firmly. He nodded disdainfully at Keith's unlit cigarette. "And I'm sure I needn't remind you that smoking whilst interviewing a Newcomer suspect would be in breach of several police regulations."

Keith Darkwood stared daggers at his interviewee, reaching out with his right arm to stab a button on the recorder.

"Interview suspended at 10:13am," said a soulless pre-recorded voice from the machine. An LED on the device flickered to orange to show the world it had stopped recording the interview. Somewhere beneath the sleek plastic surface of the machine, a compact disc ceased its spinning.

"Just off for a smoke, Jayne," lied Darkwood, and stomped grimly out of the room. The door flapped dismally in his wake, and was pulled shut with a dull clunk of finality.

In interview room three, a bored sort of silence descended. It was finally broken by the solicitor, a minute or two later. He had removed a pack of Tenc-tonese herbal cigarettes from his pocket, and began to remove the plastic film. But stopped. He smiled with false politeness at DC Smith.

"I'm sorry - do you mind if I smoke, Miss Smith?" Jayne wondered if the conversation was going in the direction she'd been expecting it to. With Erbank having obvious links with the Arcleacay group, and Varque being more than keen to represent his interests, it was clear that something was going on here. Darkwood - currently leaning on the outside of the door with his ear to the varnish - had agreed to leave Smith alone with the pair of them for a few minutes, to see if Varque would try anything.

It looked like he'd just started trying it. Smith glanced with open distaste at the packet of cigarettes Varque was opening.

"Yes," she said, with conviction. "I find smoking repulsive. It destroys the body."

Varque gave a thin smile and returned the mint-leaf smokes to the depths of his jacket. "Quite right, quite right," said he. "A filthy habit. As it is said, the body receives enough-"

"-toxicity without further being self-inflicted," chorused Smith, quoting from a textbook she'd read up on in preparation for this unrecorded part of the interview. Varque raised what passed for an eyebrow.

"You're familiar with the teachings of Maolen?" he said, slightly taken aback. This was far better than he'd hoped.

Jayne nodded. "Of course," she said, making the sign of Zel. "My parents were both Zelians, as am I."

There was a thoughtful pause, and Varque offered another of his thin smiles. "Myself since birth," he said, nodding reverently. "As is my client, Mr Erbank."

Robert gave an affirmative sort of sneer.

"Tell me, Miss Smith, are you familiar with the full details of Mr Erbank's assault charge?" asked Varque politely.

Jayne flapped the corner of a beige document folder. "Only what I've read in the report," she lied. "He got violent when DS Black attempted to question him, and escaped from the scene of the crime. DS Darkwood picked him up a few minutes later."

"Ah," said Jonah. He steepled his fingers. "You aren't aware that Mr Erbank was stationed outside the public house as part of the Arcleacley Group's anti-toxin campaign, then?"

Smith's irises blanched in feigned surprise. "Arcleacley? I had no idea."

Jonah gave a broad smile. "It's part of our sour milk deterrent programme," he said. "Mr Erbank was simply handing leaflets to potential drinkers as they entered the establishment - a completely non-violent protest. On seeing your Sergeant Black approach in such an antagonistic manner, he mistook him for a—"

The door opened, and Varque's voice tailed off as Keith Darkwood entered bearing a scowl pointed directly at him. Although there wasn't actually a tiny raincloud hovering above the human's head, there might as well have been for all the cheeriness he was displaying.

"Ready to talk, Robbie boy?" sneered Keith, wagging a new packet of cigarettes at the Newcomer. Erbank returned the sneer with redoubled vehemence.

"No?" said Keith, politely. He smiled, and turned on his heel. "I think I'll go down the pub," he said,

making for the door. "Lock him back up, Jayne."

Varque rose to his feet indignantly. "You're planning to return my client to the cells?"

"He's been charged - we can keep him for twenty-four hours until we've finished questioning him. Perhaps even forty-eight if we drop it to ABH at the last minute," said Darkwood. He examined his wristwatch with a theatrical flourish, and the device bleeped a few tinny notes at him.

"See for breakfast tomorrow then, Robert," smiled nasty-cop Darkwood, going back to his office. Smith shrugged with feigned helplessness, and followed.

★

"E kleezantsun!" cried the elderly Tenctonese vagrant, continuing on the theme he'd been extolling ever since Black had asked him if he'd seen anything. There was a tinge of madness in his eyes, and more than a hint in his voice, but Stephen hadn't quite yet dismissed him as a nutter. "E kleezantsun' roost res!"

"An Overseer," said the monotone voice of Black's personal translator. It was a clunky hand-held device, a cheap Japanese import. Black always carried it with him, in case he had to interview any of the older Tenctonese who didn't speak English. A clumsy length of RS232 cable connected it to the side of his battered police computer, which was dutifully recording the conversation.

"An Overseer killed her," added the device, emotionlessly.

"Okay, okay. Quiet," said Black, who was getting a bit sick of this. The translator analysed his words



and made a noise like a coffee machine.

The dishevelled elder bit warily on his lip. "Kleezantsun," he whispered. The translator did its usual translation.

"Where did this Overseer go after he'd killed her?" said Black. His translator echoed his question in Tenctonese.

"Back," came the reply, translated.

"Back where?"

"Back inside."

Black looked doubtful. "He ran into a building?"

"No. The Overseer returned inside."

"Inside where?"

"Someone else," said the gannaum, levelly.

"What?" Black wrinkled his nose. The elderly Newcomer's breath carried a faint tinge of sour milk, and the detective groaned weakly. "Can you describe this assailant to me, sir?" he asked, doubtfully.

The gannaum's cheerfulness did nothing but deepen Black's sneer. "About four feet tall, had big white eyes and floated about three feet above the pavement," he said. "Dark-skinned, as well. He flew off into the pub, flew into someone else. Only missed me because I was hiding."

"Behind a mauve pachyderm, no doubt," concluded Detective Sergeant Black, shaking his head sadly. He scowled a goodbye to the Newcomer, and pressed a button on his police computer advising its conversation-recording device not to waste the disk space on this drivel.

"The phrase 'bugger off' is not in my lexicon," commented a non-plussed electronic translator. Black thumped it.

★

There was a clunk, a hiss, and DS Keith Darkwood inadvertently demonstrated his earlier arrest technique, this time with himself as the victim. He grimaced a bit.

"So what do you think Varque was up to?" said Keith, mopping at his face with a dark grey handkerchief. He and Smith were sat at their respective desks in the otherwise empty CID office, enjoying the beverages of their choosing.

Smith sipped at a vaguely-sour cup of cold tea, and gave a noncommittal shrug. "He was clearly trying to get me on his side," she said. "Getting the charges dropped seemed something of a priority."

"He certainly seemed to be sticking his neck out a bit," said Darkwood. "Rather unusual for our dear Mr Varque. Normally he tends to play it somewhat safer, particular for thugs such as Erbank."

"Varque must be heavily in with the Arcleacley Group," reasoned Smith. "And he jumped at the chance of defending Erbank. He's up to something, there."

"Indeed, indeed," nodded Darkwood. "Wouldn't surprise me in the slightest."

He turned his attention to the screen of his computer, which was sporting several hundred tiny blobs of cola. The light of the cathode rays was twisted in interesting and colourful ways. A wipe with the handkerchief reduced the spattering to a nice rainbow smear, and Darkwood peered through it as he typed single-handed at the keyboard.

The computer warbled a bit. A sneering photo of Robert Erbank dropped onto the screen, and numerous lines of text formed a criminal backdrop.

"A couple of ABHs, a few GBHs - our Mr Erbank seems to enjoy his fisticuffs," said Darkwood. "Oh, and a nice armed robbery back in '95. Charges dropped due to lack of evidence."

Smith nodded thoughtfully.

"Freeing a blagger so he can keep his appointment for a blag in the afternoon is the cliché we reach for here, I believe," shrugged Darkwood. "Varque's urgency probably indicates that Erbank is due to take part in something later today."

"Drop all charges and put Erbank under surveillance, then?"

"Worth a shot," shrugged Darkwood, reaching for his coat, laptop and police radio. It took a while, with one arm in a sling. "Black can always go and get beaten up again if we change our minds."

★

The saloon bar of the Cooper's Arms was now empty but for half a dozen police officers and the gloomy figure of Phil the barman, stood in the shadows idly polishing a glass. Doors barred and witnesses shooed away, the police collated information.

"We've got a couple of people saying that Kathryn collapsed onto the pavement before bursting into flame," said a young WPC, reading from her notebook. Expensive police computers hadn't quite made it throughout the force, yet. "Most of the others didn't notice her until the fire started, though."

PC Steel nodded. "I've got one witness saying that she clutched her stomach before collapsing," he said. "It's looking - particularly from the corpse - as if the fire started somewhere on her lower torso."

"I don't suppose anyone got a description of the attackers?" said Crowley. "If there were any attackers?"

"How does a flying midget Overseer strike you?" said Black. He giggled quietly to himself, having downed a few pints in the past few hours. He was now, as the man said, "nice drunk".

"I don't know, how does a flying midget Overseer strike you?" said PC Steel, who was in that sort of mood.

If Black had a punchline, Crowley drowned it out with a pointed cough. "No signs of it being murder, then?" he asked.

"Not a direct assault by the look of it," said DI Morgan. "Although I could probably think of a few ways to set fire to someone from a distance."

"We'll see what forensic makes of the corpse," was Crowley's decision. He rose from his chair. "Thanks for your time, people," he said, nodding to the boys and girls in blue serge. "I trust that Black's OCR'd all of your notes?"

Stephen proudly waggled a peripheral of his battered computer. "Yes," he confirmed. The tiny bar of light had scanned and deciphered the biroed notes of the uniformed officers, storing them neatly on the hard disk of his portable.

"Back to the streets of terror, then," said Crowley, indicating the pub door. The uniformed officers nodded in a businesslike fashion and filed out onto

Nightingale Road, before going their separate ways. The three CID officers clicked shut their computers, fiddled with biroes and headed for the door.

Crowley and Morgan emerged into the gloomy late-morning sunlight, but Black was stopped by Phil the barman.

"Can I open up again, then?" he said, having lost a good half- hour's worth of takings.

Black looked over at the door, which swung slowly shut behind DI Morgan. He turned his attention to the beer engines, and warily patted a pocket. Loose change clinked.

"Five minutes," said Stephen Black, pulling up a stool.



Smith's Metro slowed to a crawl as it drove down Ryland Street. Erbank had parked his car halfway down the road, on the left, and was striding up a littered front path towards number fifty-eight.

"Pull over and we'll watch," advised Darkwood to his driver.

"Er, any ideas where?" said Smith. Both sides of the street were full of cars, and the few adjoining roads offered nothing in the way of a vantage point.

There was a whine and a clinking rattle as a milk-float vacated its parking space and went about its business. Darkwood shrugged. It was perhaps a bit near to Erbank's car, but on the opposite side of the road. "That'll do," he said, and Smith performed a near perfect bit of parallel parking.

Darkwood slumped down in his seat slightly, and clumsily pulled a magazine from his pocket. He feigned reading it, instead peering across the street over a satirically-captioned cover photo. Erbank knocked urgently on the front door of number-fifty eight, giving the odd shifty look up and down the street.

The battered plywood door was pulled open, and a pale Tenctonese face peered out into the daylight. Darkwood gave a surprised look.

"Well, well, well," said Keith. "Ford. There's a thing."

"Shh," hissed Jayne, and with a low whine she thumbed down the electric window on the passenger side. The Tenctonese detective tilted her head slightly. She listened carefully for about thirty seconds, after which time the two suspects vanished into the house.

"They said something about a group meeting later this afternoon," she said, her acute hearing having picked up every word. "Erbank's been laughing about how Varque managed to get his charges dropped, and they've just gone in for a quick drink before departing."

"Ah," said Darkwood. He gave a vaguely impressed smile.

"What were you saying, anyway? You know the guy in the house?"

Darkwood nodded. "Ford Anglia. He was involved in that sjabroka dealing thing a few years back," he said. His voice faltered slightly. "The case where Crowley fatally injured that Overseer."

"Andrew Christ, yes," said Smith. "Before my time, but we've all heard of it. What was Anglia's involvement?"

"Manufacturing the stuff," said Darkwood. "Although he claimed he was being controlled by Christ, through Holy Gas. Fairly probable, really - he was being very lethargic and cretinous when we arrested him. He got off with two years suspended when it went to trial."

Darkwood kept a wary eye on the window of the house. Erbank and Anglia were half visible in a couple of armchairs. "He must have been out for a fair while, now - don't think he's been up to much since, though." He idly turned a page in his magazine, and glanced down at his watch. "Apparently a born-again Zelian, these days. Doesn't drink, smoke--"

Erbank and Anglia seemed to draw their conversation to a close, and Jayne nudged her assigned partner. The two suspects emerged from the terraced house and pulled the door shut behind them. Jayne listened.

"And they're now apparently going to pick up someone called Anne," explained Smith, with half a shrug.

"Start the engine, then," said Darkwood. The presumed partners in crime approached Erbank's car, talking to each other as they walked towards it.

And past it. Into the road. Towards Smith's Metro. Darkwood suddenly looked very nervous indeed.

"Either Anne lives on this side of the road, or we're in trouble," he whispered shakily. The two criminals were still chatting to one another, not looking in the detectives' direction. "Kiss me," said Smith flatly.

Darkwood turned to face her, and raised his eyebrows in a non-plussed fashion. This was, to say the least, a rather unexpected request. "Er, what?" he said warily, harbouring some doubt of his aural systems.

"Kiss me," she repeated, with urgency. "Quickly."

"Dear gods," said DS Darkwood. "Well, if you insist." With a slight shrug and a certain degree of hesitancy, he launched into one of the oldest clichés in the book.



Paul Bearer lay on a marble slab with a blank expression, the ash and soot washed from his corpse. Karen Henderson, Vyse Street's resident pathologist, was poking around the torched stomach cavity, pointing out items of interest to DI Crowley.

"It's fairly clear that the fire actually started *behind* the ribcage," said Karen, poking at the charred internal organs with a pinkly-stained metal implement. "Which would seem to suggest that something flammable was stabbed or shot into his stomach, and it ignited the gases within," she shrugged. "It's the only theory we've got."

"I don't suppose you can tell what he'd been eating lately?" said Crowley, a shade optimistically.

Henderson smiled weakly. "Nothing survived the fire, no," she stated. "Although there are traces of tannin on the throat lining."

"Tannin? As in tea?"

Karen nodded. "Probably the last thing he drank, unless the smoke brought it back up."

Unlikely as it seemed, the evidence pointed to a distinct lack of direct assailant. If they'd found a pint

glass of rocket fuel and a packet of smokes on the scene of the crime, it would have been easy to work out. But tea? Would it be possible to dose it with a taste-free and very effective accelerant? And perhaps to slip a tiny igniter in there?

"Do we know anything more about the tea?"

Karen nodded. She pointed to a slightly buckled plastic cup, dusted with ash. "Drinks machine darjeeling," she declared. "We found this on the floor nearby, with his saliva on the lip."

DI Crowley frowned slightly as memories of darjeeling returned to him. Black must have collected his tea about five minutes before Paul Bearer burst aflame at the foot of the vending machine.

"Was the milk slightly on the turn?" asked David warily. The taste of slightly-sour milk was still on his tongue.

"Yes, now that you mention it. Why do you ask?"

Crowley's stomach rumbled.

"Excuse me," he croaked, leaving in something of a hurry.

★



DC Jayne Smith withdrew from the embrace, and Keith Darkwood, looking somewhat dazed, sat back up in his seat.

"Sorry," he said, vaguely, shaking his head slightly to clear it. He felt like an atheist who'd just had a glimpse of a previously doubted heaven. It was his first proper kiss in twenty-six years - such feelings were only to be expected, really.

"I'm not terribly good at this sort of thing," he added, which was nothing if not true.

Smith turned her attention to her Metro's steering column, and tinkered with a few things. The engine rumbled into life. "They're taking Anne to a meeting at a community centre in Malton," she said, checking her rear view mirror. "Apparently some sort of Arcleacley Group gathering."

Darkwood sat up straight, picked his magazine up from the floor and put on one of his less inspiring doubtful frowns. Erbank's Volvo was turning off along Grosvenor Street West, with two passengers in the back seat. With some surprise, he realised that he'd been completely unaware of outside events during his unexpected kiss with Jayne.

"They said the meeting starts at eleven," said Smith, who gave the impression of being unaware of the kiss during outside events. The Metro pulled out into the road. "Sounds like a fairly big gathering - I recommend we tail them, and get hold of a couple of undercover Tenctonese officers to go in."

Darkwood shook his head weakly.

"Whatever," he said absently, and regarded his reflection in a cracked wing mirror. He still looked like a corpse with a hangover. The kiss can't have meant anything to her, he told himself. Keith sneered at his mirror image and drummed fingers on the dash. A glance in Smith's direction saw her impassively concentrating on her driving.

"Whatever."

★

"What's up with Crowley?" said Stephen Black warily, as he returned to the CID office from a visit to the canteen. "Hmm?" replied Morgan, looking up from her computer. "Just saw him sprinting along the corridor downstairs," said Black, jerking a thumb back over his shoulder in case Jenny had forgotten where downstairs was. "Grabbed me by the lapels and asked if me or Darkwood had drunk any of that tea this morning."

"And had you?"

"No fear - spat into the wastebin, my sip of it. Darkwood likewise."

"Hmm."

"After that he just ran off down the corridor looking scared," Black scratched vaguely at his beard. "He's in a strange old mood today, isn't he?"

Jennifer shrugged, and returned to her work. "Probably nothing serious," she surmised. "I shouldn't worry about it."

The fire alarm had other ideas.

★

PC Naytor was the first on the scene. The station's arcane fire control system had neatly pinpointed the blaze to a gents toilet on the ground floor, and a few officers were converging there. Hesitantly, Naytor touched the back of his hand to the metal handle of the door. Cold.

He kicked it open dramatically, revealing the fairly grim interior of the toilets. A very thin trace of smoke hung in the air, and Detective Inspector David Crowley lay flat on the tiles, his face resting in a puddle of unpleasantly bloody vomit.

Naytor rushed across to the fallen Newcomer and rolled him over onto his back. Crowley coughed and spluttered, bringing up a fresh tide of digestive juices. Pink blood bubbled from his nose.

"It's alright," called the young Newcomer constable, dismissing the other officers with his free hand. He hauled Crowley into an upright position, tilting the detective's head forward. A thin dribble escaped from his lips onto the tiles.

Dominic Naytor coughed mildly, inhaling tobacco smoke from somewhere. Looking over his shoulder, a packet of cigarettes was lying discarded in an empty cubicle. A single tab was smoking gently on the floor, alongside DS Black's lighter. Thin grey smoke curled upwards into the ceiling-mounted smoke detector.

"He just needs some fresh air," called Dom, lifting Crowley to his feet. "Give me a hand, here." A couple of other constables dutifully helped drag the groaning detective out through the nearby pair of fire doors.

★

Smith's Metro was parked on the corner of a dark street in Malton, the murky inner-city area of Birmingham claimed by the Newcomers since their arrival. The Tenctonese population of England was pretty much divided up between here and Greenwood house, with the wealthier Newcomers finding residence in more pleasant parts of the city.

"Malton" was an old Tenctonese word, translating to something along the lines of "cursed place". Darkwood could see the thinking behind that one. Nearby buildings cast their inky shadows over the streets for the majority of the daylight hours, and there was a palpable air of gloom and decay to the area. Every window seemed to be either boarded up or shattered, every door nailed shut or home to a slumbering unfortunate. Tenctonese and humans shuffled to and fro along the littered pavements, generally ignoring each other. Now and again an isolated fight would break out, occasionally a full-scale riot would develop, but peace was generally maintained until after the pubs closed.

"Control to Smith," whispered the detective's radio, its volume having been wisely turned down. The Maltonians had a very dim view of the police force, and the acute hearing of their Newcomer populace meant that any bobbies walking through the area with their radios on might as well be spilling blood in shark-infested waters.

The car's stereo thumped out Touss la Duga's latest single, a passable cover version of one of Darkwood's favourites, "Eebta". The long-haired detective drummed his fingers rhythmically on the dashboard, and the music covered up the police radio decently enough.

"Smith here," said Jayne, talking into the radio without drawing too much attention to it. "Any luck?" she asked. Five minutes ago she'd called in a request for two undercover Tenctonese officers.

"Negative," replied the voice. "Tertip and Firmer are out on a call over the other side of the city, Ceide's with an arrest as we speak, Faustus is at a training conference, Stupidname is off sick and Bearer's no longer with us. We can only give you PC Naytor, I'm afraid."

Smith looked up at Darkwood, who obviously hadn't heard her radio and was quietly singing to himself, eyes on the street. The long-haired detective pointedly directed a lyric, or at least its English translation, at the cloudy heavens. "That'd be fine," she said. "Absolutely fine."

"ETA ten minutes," said the voice.

"Acknowledged," said Smith, and turned her radio off. She turned the stereo down a bit, and Darkwood's imperfect singing voice croaked into silence. He turned to face her, wearing a quizzical look.

"We've got backup," she explained, tapping her lapel.

"Oh," he said. "Who?"

"Naytor."

Darkwood regarded middle-distance for a short while. "Short bloke? Triangle on his forehead? Vegetarian? Seems to have picked up most of his police training from American cop shows?"

Jayne smiled faintly. "That's him."

Keith nodded to himself. He'd had vague dealings with Naytor before, during the sjabroka investigations a few years back. A reliable officer. There was silence. "And who else have we got?" he prompted.

"Oh," said Smith. "Nobody else. They're all off on calls, or sick. Very sick, in Bearer's case."

"So, er, are we calling it off?" Sending a lone officer into the meeting hall was probably a bad idea, and breached a few regulations in any case.

"No, I'll go in with him," Smith declared.

Darkwood thought to say something, but didn't. He deflated a bit. "Well, if you're sure," he said. Keith looked up through the windscreen. Malton Taffacalpa - a vague translation of Malton Town Hall, which was what the building used to be - was on the other side of a crossroads. Newcomers were slowly filing into the building. As he watched, the barcode-patterned head of Robert Erbank ducked through the front door, closely followed by Ford Anglia and Anne Algesic.

Keith examined his wristwatch. "How long have we got?"

"Ten minutes 'til the meeting starts. Dom should be here in about five."

Darkwood shrugged. "Marvellous," he said, and glumly returned to his magazine.

★

"Here's your lighter," said Crowley, staggering into the office and dropping the cheap plastic device onto Black's desk. It bounced away under a teetering pile of papers. "And your cigarettes," he added. A half-empty packet of smokes followed a similar trajectory.

"You feeling alright, David?" asked Morgan, "You look a little ill."

Crowley smiled weakly, his face looking rather pallid. His eyes bore a greenish tinge, a colour signifying pain. "Vomiting copiously, is all," he said. "I nipped into the toilets for a quick smoke - that's why the fire alarm just went off."

Black was warily regarding his cigarettes. They were damp with sprinkler water. "One of mine?" he asked, doubtfully, filing away the packet in a desk drawer.

The Newcomer detective nodded. "Indeed," he said. "It seemed the best way to throw up in a hurry. The finger-down-the-throat trick is a bit hit-and-miss with us lot."

"Dare we ask why you needed to throw up in a hurry?"

Crowley coughed thinly. "I think I've finally sussed the Cold Fire deaths," he said, rather proudly. This impressive declaration was greeted by silence from his two colleagues.

"Er, what cold fire deaths?" frowned Morgan.

"Bearer, de Fey and Wheel."

"Cold fire?" asked Black, "Er, what?"

"You've never heard of the Cold Fire legend?"

"Can't say I have," frowned Black, who rather prided himself on being up to speed with most legends and mythologies. Even a few of the Tenctonese ones, after a few long nights in the pub with Crowley.

The Newcomer DI waggled a finger beckoningly. "Take a look at this," he suggested, wandering over to his desktop computer and prodding a few buttons. A piece of electronic mail scrolled its way onto the screen.

"You're right, Lethaka," said the message, "There is a legend about this sort of thing. An obscure subject of the Ionians, if memory serves - they believed that any sort of voluntarily ingested toxin would cause their bodies to burst aflame. Standard wrath of the gods rubbish, pretty much. A couple of holy texts featured deaths like this - Cold Fire is the approximate English translation of the term for it. So called because - well - the fire actually seems to be cold. Straight oxidation whilst giving out hardly any heat to surrounding objects.

It was all dredged up again on the slave ships by the Overseers, as much of our mythology was. Details on this are pretty sketchy, but there were *definitely* at least a dozen Cold Fire deaths during my time on the ship. From what we could make out, the Overseers had engineered some sort of poison that - after remaining dormant for a while - set flame to the slaves' stomach juices, throwing out a few highly flammable chemicals to keep it going. Hell knows why, but there we are.

Sounds like some Overseer's found his old chemistry set and is in a vindictive mood. Check what stomach contents remain, I should. Throat linings and such.

Fear the light,
Morfran."

"Hmm. Who might Morfran be, then?" asked Black, looking up from the tiny screen and glancing questioningly at Crowley. His knowledge of Welsh mythology provided an answer that he rather hoped wasn't the case. The Newcomer smiled.

"An old, old friend of mine from the ship. He knows a lot about this sort of thing."

Jenny squinted at the message's cryptic headers. "An Icelandic email address?" she said doubtfully. "I thought you all lived in Birmingham or around Los Angeles?"

"Oh, a few went elsewhere," said Crowley. "A few."

"Hmm," said Black. "Well, anyway," he added, tapping the screen, "You think this is what's happening? Explosive poisonings?"

"Could well be," nodded Crowley. "The deaths are looking dangerously similar to the Cold Fire legend."

"And you coughing your lungs up in the toilets was because...?"

"I think I probably swallowed some of the poison," said Crowley. "The last thing Bearer drank was a cup of tea. Drinks machine darjeeling. Milk slightly on the turn." He regarded Black's horrified look.

"It's bloody poisoned, or something..." whispered the detective sergeant, echoing his darjeeling-based conspiracy theory of this morning. "So that's why you asked me if I'd drank any of it."

"Quite."

"How come you didn't burst aflame instantaneously, though?" frowned Black. "After all, Bearer must have done - he was dead next to the drinks machine."

"Perhaps," said Crowley. "He might just have been walking back past it, I suppose, but it seems unlikely. We'll know more about what we're up against when the boys in the lab have given the drinks machine closer inspection."

"Hmm," said Black.

"But how about de Fey and Wheel, though? Surely they didn't touch the drinks machine darjeeling?" asked Morgan.

"De Fey had a milkbottle on his table, you'll remember; the forensics found a shattered tumbler in the wreckage of the corpse, with traces of sour milk," said Crowley. "And Wheel downed a can of Glihablazichni shortly before catching fire, of course." He darkly raised a bald eyebrow.

"My god," breathed Morgan. "Somebody's poisoning all of Birmingham's milk?"

"Maybe not *all* of it, but this certainly fits in with the pub burglaries," said Crowley. "Barrels of sour milk being stolen, arcanelly drugged and resold on the black market, very probably back to the pubs they were taken from."

The two human detectives shook their heads helplessly for a moment, struggling to take in the sheer horror of this turn in events. "Issue a public warning, phone the pubs and off-licences, and stop drinking vending machine tea?" suggested Black, weakly.

"Better safe than dead," shrugged DI Crowley.

★

"Have you read this?" laughed PC Matthew Steel, looking up from his newspaper at the none-too-cheery DS Darkwood. Keith was gazing down the road at the looming brickwork of Malton Taffacalpa, occasionally glancing at his watch. Now and again a couple of stragglers wandered into the building, but nobody was leaving.

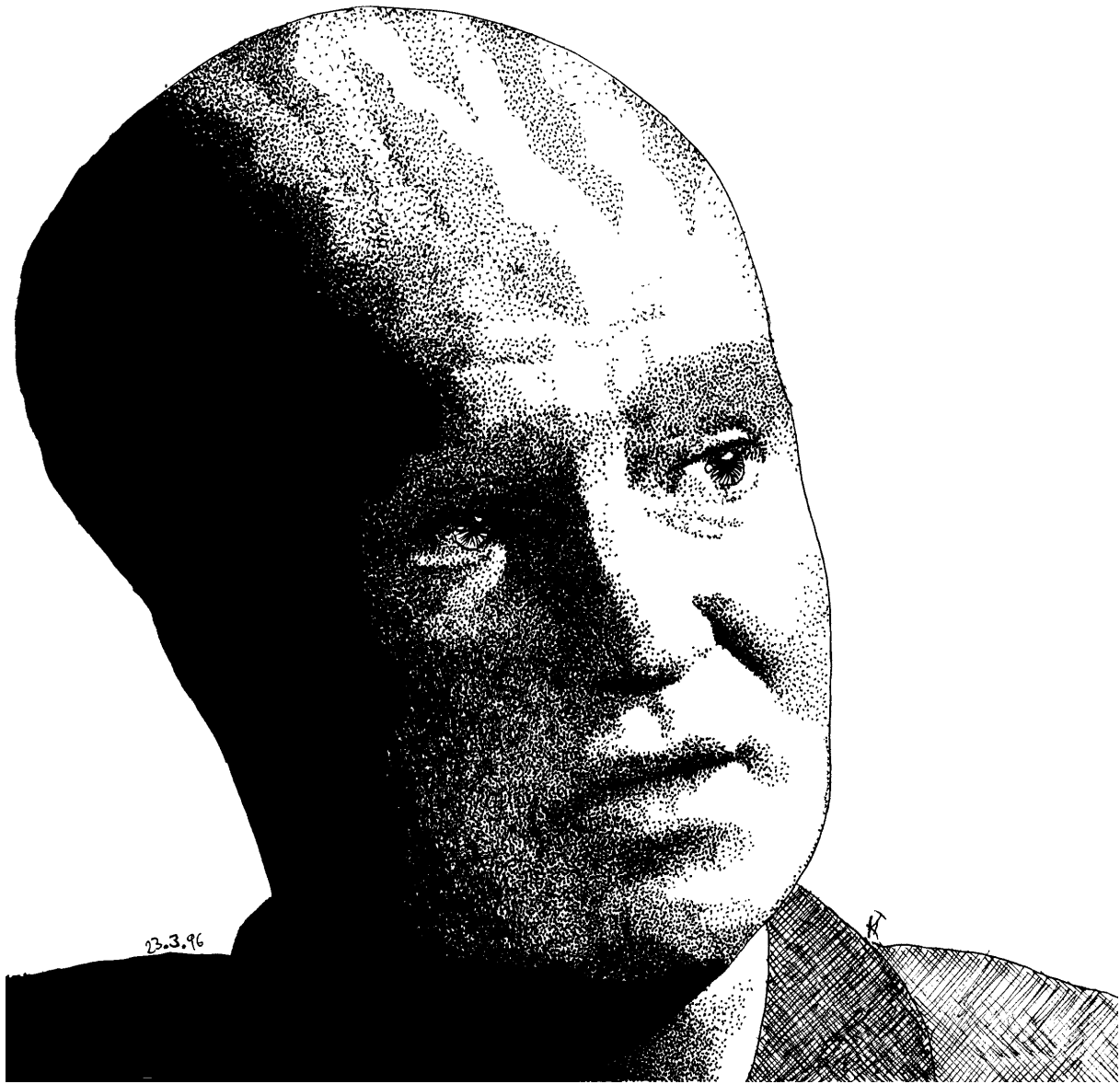
"Have I read what?" said Keith, distractedly.

"Undead Newcomer Arson Attack," read the PC. "Apparently some zombified slag was seen setting flame to an office block a few weeks ago - some witness has just come forward."

"Oh yes?" said Darkwood, mildly. There had never been a proper investigation into the Eric Praline case, since the corpse never underwent autopsy. The official verdict was that Praline was alive throughout - he'd been heavily drugged on the night of his "death", assumed to be dead by the doctor who examined him, and Praline was wheeled away to NecroTech cryogenics as requested in his last will and testament. He had recovered three weeks later, escaped from his cryogenic chamber and attempted to return home. Eventually the strain of events proved too much for him, and he died peacefully in his flat on Wednesday the ninth.

Darkwood had seen Praline's face. No living person, alien or otherwise, could possibly look like that without being six foot under. He gave an involuntary shudder at the memory.

"Come forward to the press rather than the police, I take it?" said Keith weakly.



"So it would seem."

"No surprise there, then," yawned Darkwood. "What does he or she have to tell us?"

"Says he saw a half-skeletal spongehead petrol-bombing the NecroTech Cryogenics building on Smith Street back in September," said PC Steel. He sniggered to himself. "Probably an unsatisfied customer."

Darkwood gave a false, weak smile. "Probably."

★

"All sour milk products obtained within the past seven days should be returned to their place of purchase," said the serious-looking face of Detective Inspector Crowley, looking out at the viewers of Central News via a few thousand cathode ray tubes. As seemed to be the case with all police officers appearing on television, an unexplained grandiloquence was creeping into his speech, and an air of solemn gravity was claiming his visage. "This is believed to be a minor oversight on the part of the area's major sour milk processing plant," he continued, "And is nothing to become alarmed about. Products can be —"

Ford Anglia thumbed the mute button on his remote control, and Crowley took to silent miming. "Maolen smiles on us," said Ford. "Less toxin for the weak-willed. Good news, eh?"

Anne Algesic gave a weary shrug from her side of the desk. The two of them were sat in an office in the upper storeys of Malton Taffacalpa. "Don't be optimistic Ford; at best it's just a dodgy batch of milk - replacement crates will be on the shelves before the end of the week."

Ford frowned with disappointment. "And at worst?"

"It's more than likely that DS Crowley has been investigating our actions and reached the wrong conclusion..." she said. "I understand that one of our victims was a police officer at Vyse Street - it's almost certain that the resident CID officers are investigating. This warning may be a result of that."

"Oh," said Ford. He half-heartedly made the sign of Zel. "May Maolen smile on us," he said.

"Let's hope so," Anne said weakly.

★

"Really?" said Darkwood, tiredly. His tone of voice suggested that he was likely to contribute the

words "Look, just shut up, will you?" to the conversation sooner rather than later.

"According to this," said Steel, having just read out a rather laughable article about a four-thousand year old Tenctonese corpse being dug up somewhere in Wiltshire. He gestured to page nine of the paper. It sported an unconvincing artist's impression of said cadaver.

"Must be true then," yawned Keith.

Darkwood looked up at the gloomy facade of Malton Taffacalpa, blankly watching silhouettes on a curtained window, before glancing down at the wristwatch strapped around his bandages. "Eleven thirty," he observed. "What time does this meeting end?"

"Any time now, apparently," said Steel. He nodded at the building over the crossroads. On cue, a group of Tenctonese had emerged from the double-doors and were making their way down the stairs to the grimy pavement. As the policemen watched, further Newcomers left the building and went about their business.

"Can you see Smith or Naytor at all?" said Darkwood, squinting at the shuffling crowd. Steel joined him for a moment.

"There's Dom," he announced, nodding in the direction of the town hall. "Just walking down the steps now." The two surveillance officers watched as the Arcleacly Group members filed out onto the pavement. The unmistakable face of Dominic Naytor bobbed out of a shadow into the murky sunlight. It bore a smile.

"Is that DC Smith that he's got his arm around?" asked Matthew.

Keith Darkwood realised with some surprise that he was actually grinding his teeth. He stopped to let a syllable escape. "Yes."

★

The CID office door creaked open, and DI Crowley entered from the corridor bearing a beige cardboard folder and a plastic cup of similar hue. He nodded a greeting to his colleagues. "Talk of the devil," said Black, on general principles. "What's that you've got there?" "Tea and toxicology reports," said David, placing both of them on his desk. The brew had a certain blackness to it, since he wasn't in the mood for taking chances. He sipped the ice-cold liquid thoughtfully, and began to leaf through the report.

"Toxicology of what, precisely?" asked Morgan.

"The corpses and the sour milk," said Crowley, examining the sheets before him. "I got the forensic boys to collect traces of milk from the three Cold Fire deaths and throw it under the microscope. See what we're up against."

"And what are we up against?"

"Absolutely nothing, it would seem," frowned Crowley. The computer printouts showed that in each case the sour milk had been normal in every respect. Not a rogue accelerant or tiny igniter to be seen. "Oh, well that's alright, then," said Black, with false cheeriness. "We can all go home."

Morgan ignored him. "Nothing at all?"

"Perfectly ordinary sour milk, as far as we can make out."

"And what about the corpses themselves?"

Crowley flipped pages. "Nothing odd in the bloodstreams, and just carbon and sour milk on the throat linings," he said. "But the remains of a very nasty accelerant in the stomachs."

"Has it been identified?"

David shook his jaggedly-striped head. "Not yet." "Hmm."

Crowley shuffled the papers into formation and neatly closed the folder. "I suggest we contact the doctors of the victims and see if any medical condition or prescribed drug might have provoked this," he said. "Since we can pretty much rule out the sour milk as the entire cause of the Cold Fires, and we haven't yet found any signs of a catalyst, there must be something internal that caused the reactions."

"I'll get onto it," said Morgan.

"And what shall I do?" said Black, who was still just about on the wrong side of sober and had quite forgotten what he was supposed to be doing.

"Drink lots of black coffee before the DCI gets back, if I were you," suggested David Crowley, rising from his chair and disappearing into the corridor.

★

Smith's Metro rolled through the shadows of Malton's dark streets, diving from patchy sunlight into utter blackness and out again. A few streetlights had awoken a few hours early and were casting their unnatural orange glows here and there, but apart from that, the afternoon shadows had claimed most of the area. Further down the road, Erbank's Volvo drove to an unknown destination, carrying two unfamiliar passengers. The two detectives maintained a respectful distance.

"So, Naytor's a friend of yours, is he?" said Darkwood, turning away from his inspection of the wing mirror to face DC Jayne Smith. She giggled vaguely, for the first time Keith could remember. He began the makings of a frown.

"A fairly old one," she answered. "We met here on Earth, years ago. Before we'd joined the force."

"Oh," said Keith. He frowned crookedly for a few moments, and shrugged. "So what happened at the meeting?" he asked.

"Nothing much, really," said Jayne. "A couple of speeches about the dangers of drink, some anti-smoking stuff and a tirade against sjabroka from Mr Anglia." She yawned quietly.

"No calls to arms, or dark plots to bomb the Houses of Parliament, then?" said Darkwood. Jayne smiled.

"Not in the slightest."

"Oh," said Darkwood. "Sorry you wasted your time, then."

Jayne gave a dismissive shrug. "Don't worry about it," she said. "The day could still prove eventful." She nodded at the car in front. Erbank had left the meeting with a couple of Newcomers, while Anglia and Algesic had mysteriously vanished from the crowd after the former's speech.

Erbank's first companion was unfamiliar, but both Smith and Darkwood had recognised his other passenger. It was none less than Brian Damage, the Newcomer responsible for putting a knife into

Keith's arm a few weeks ago. Brian had been released on bail pending the trial. Casting his mind back, Darkwood could recall Jonah Varque handling the case when Damage was brought back to the station. He frowned mildly.

Keith turned his thoughtful gaze back to the windscreen, and watched as twin red brakelights vanished into the shadow of a derelict office block. Erbank's car swerved to the right for the briefest of moments and then, rather unexpectedly, exploded.

★

Morgan replaced the receiver with a faraway look in her eye. She fumbled the lid back onto a dying biro and dropped it into a chipped pen-filled mug.

"Colds," said Morgan, blankly. "They all had colds..."

Black looked up, and sniffed. "Who did?"

"The Cold Fire victims," said Jennifer. She nodded at the telephone. "I've just been talking to their doctors - no drugs have been prescribed to any of them. And the only shared medical condition between them is that they'd all been struck down with Britain's current batch of common cold, within the past week."

Black considered this for a moment, and his face fell slightly. "So that's what triggered the fire?" he said, "Some chemical from the cold bursting aflame when it hit sour milk?"

"It's possible."

"Hell's teeth," he muttered, finishing off his fourth black coffee and sitting up straight. Something inside him was stirring him to uncharacteristic enthusiasm. Caffeine tended to do that to him, on rare occasions. "Whatever shall we do?"

"Another television announcement?"

Black considered this. He wondered how he'd feel if Crowley popped up on the news and told him that a swift pint would kill him instantly. 'Panic' would probably be a very good word for it. "Er," he said. "Word it carefully. Get all cold sufferers to see their doctors, so that they can prescribe a lack of sour milk until it clears up?"

Morgan nodded warily, and made a couple of phonecalls. Black drank another couple of coffees.

"Oh," said Morgan, replacing the receiver again.

"What?"

"Do you know how many Newcomer cold sufferers there are in Birmingham at this point in time?"

Black shrugged. "Er, not off-hand, no," he admitted. "Pray tell."

"Well over a thousand," Morgan revealed.

"Ah," said Black, nodding grimly. "Ah."

★

Erbank's Volvo had swerved off of the road, across a patch of scrubland and had smashed radiator-first into a brace of sturdy concrete bollards. Orange flame roared within the vehicle, and thick black smoke boiled out of the shattered windows. A few feet the other side of the posts, Erbank lay motionless in the mud, flung neatly out through the windscreen. With a strained creak, a door was pushed open, and Brian Damage slumped out groggily onto the ground. He gave a few feet's worth of half-hearted crawl before losing consciousness.

Smith's Metro slewed to a halt at a safe distance from the crash, and the two detectives emerged. "Ambulance and fire engine to the wasteground on Vauxhall Road," called Smith into her radio as she sprinted across the mud. "Priority."

Jayne began to look distinctly uncomfortable as the two detectives neared the blazing car. She instinctively backed away from the growing inferno as its heat hit her. Curling flames reflected in her green-shaded eyes, the twin images themselves reflecting the terror in her soul. Bred for sub-zero labour, none of the British Newcomers were overly happy in the presence of fire. Approximately one in five were mildly pyrophobic. It gave the Cold Fire deaths a particularly ironic twist.

Smith continued to back away. "I'll get these two out the way," she shouted, skirting around the bollards to approach the two injured Newcomers. "You deal with the car."

"Wonderful," hissed Darkwood to himself, warily approaching the blazing wreck. The crimson paint was peeling away from the doors, revealing the bare metal beneath, and Keith winced. Clumsily, he tugged a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it around his free hand. He stood and stared at it blankly for a moment, doubting its ability to spare him from the fire.

"Er," he dithered, trying to remember if he'd ever been trained for this sort of thing. The plastic doorhandle has also chosen to melt in light of recent events, which wasn't overly helpful. Darkwood bit his lip, and craned his neck to look inside the wrecked car.

"Over here!" shouted Smith. "Quickly!"

There was no point in Darkwood trying to rescue the second passenger, she had realised. Not when her charred skull was lying in the grass ten feet away.

Darkwood glanced over at Jayne, who was dragging the unconscious Robert Erbank away from the scene of the crash. She nodded urgently at Brian Damage who was clumsily crawling away from the blaze. "Get him out of here!"

Flinging his handkerchief to the mud, Keith Darkwood bounded across to the fallen thug and made the best attempt he could to pull him to safety. One arm in a sling with a knifewound wasn't terribly conducive to this. He sat Damage up, wrapped his free arm around the Newcomer's chest and slowly began to pull him through the mud. His eyes rose to the car. The fire was spreading.

"It's going to hit the petrol tank, any minute," thought Darkwood, and began a panicked hurry to safety. Brian's slumped body gouged a trench in the mud and grass as it was pulled onwards with increasing urgency.

For the second time in as many minutes, Robert Erbank's Volvo exploded. Splinters of flaming metal shrapnelled away at dangerous velocities as the fuel tank decided to finally get out of the metaphorical kitchen. "Thought so," was Keith Darkwood's last thought process for some while.

★

"Over a thousand with colds," said Morgan. "Consider how many of those have drunk sour milk



since catching the strain, and we must have had an improbable number of unnoticed STCs.”

“STCs?” said Black warily.

“Spontaneous Tenctonese Combustions,” said Morgan, who had already started writing the report. She gave a thin smile. “Looking at deaths by fire for the past few weeks, we’ve had just three, plus the established STCs.”

“Oh,” said Black. “Yes. Good point. We must be missing something.”

Morgan considered Black’s talent for stating the obvious, and shrugged. “We must be,” she echoed, stating the obvious herself.

But what? Unless heavy coincidence was at work, the sour milk had a hand in the STCs somewhere. And the cold virus. But there had to be something else, to account for the minimal number of cases. Morgan shuddered slightly. Could it just be an unfortunate cocktail of household snacks? Milk, a nasty cold strain, a certain brand of chocolate cake and the next thing you know you’re up in flames? A frightening thought.

“Well, I’ll leave it in the capable hands of you and Crowley. I must be off,” said Black, rising unsteadily from his seat. “Crimes to solve. Wrongs to right. Pubs to visit.” He picked up his computer, donned his fire-damaged jacket and headed for the office door, away to the streets of Birmingham to further investigate the sour milk burglaries.

He bumped into Crowley just as he passed through the door, and mumbled a farewell before vanishing down the stairwell. David entered the CID office, Dominic following him in.

“DI Jennifer Morgan, this is PC Dominic Naylor from uniform,” he said, waving an introductory hand between the two of them. They exchanged greetings. Crowley turned to Dom, and raised a brace of hairless eyebrows.

“Tell her what you told me,” he said, very seriously indeed.

★

Darkwood’s alarm clock sounded somehow different this morning. A bit more of an urgent sine wave to its wake-up tone. And it seemed rather louder than usual. The detective warily opened his bloodshot eyes.

He regarded the bedroom ceiling. It looked a mite more metallic than it normally was. A blue light was flashing in through darkened windows. And aside from the alarm, background noise consisted of some crackling radio static and a few important-sounding bleeps. And a rumbling engine. Keith frowned in groggy puzzlement.

“He’s coming around,” said an ambulance crewman.

Slightly numb with unknown sedatives, and with a nagging pain in his right arm, Keith Darkwood closed his eyes again. “Not if I can help it,” he mut-

tered.

★

DS Black removed a slim plastic pipe from his mouth and squinted at a tiny bank of LEDs on the side of an impressive little black box. One of them was blinking cheerily back at him.

"It's green," said Stephen, looking up at PC Matthew Steel. "I presume that's good?"

Steel nodded, and reclaimed his breathalyser. "Yes," he said, pocketing the tiny device for future use on the streets of Birmingham, "You're safe to drive." Matthew paused as he considered Black's battered old Cortina and slightly careless driving technique. "From the alcohol viewpoint, anyway."

"Much thanks," said the sober detective, rising from his seat in the canteen. He rose to about three-quarters of his considerable height before a hand clapped him on the shoulder.

Black turned around. It was Smith. He grinned warily.

"You're on the pub burglary cases, aren't you?" she asked.

Stephen nodded. "Just away to solve them now, as it happens," he said. "Whyever do you ask?"

"We've got a couple of prisoners for you."

"Oh?" said Black. His grin broadened.

"Robert Erbank and Brian Damage," she said. "Turns out they had a Volvo full of stolen milk. Rather fire-damaged now, admittedly, but we've traced some of what's left. Stolen from the Cooper's Arms on Saturday."

"The lads are in custody, are they?"

"As we speak. Cells three and seven."

Black clapped his hands and rubbed them purposefully together. He grinned brightly. "Marvelous."

★

In the back bedroom of a suburban terraced house, Anne Algesic fiddled with a bunsen burner. A beaker of sour milk bubbled gently above the clean blue flame. She leaned forward and sniffed the thin steam it was giving off.

Surreptitiously, she turned her head to face the door. Her strikingly mauve eyes peered out along the empty hallway, warily looking for Ford Anglia. Clearly he wasn't about.

With the makings of a smile, Anne lifted the beaker from its tripod, to her mouth. She sipped the lumpy white liquid. Her gaze dropped to the flickering blue flame of the bunsen burner.

The dancing fire reflected prettily in her dark purple irises. She smiled.

★

"I used to work on deck twenty six, the gurdmeena processing plant," said Dominic, sat at Black's unorganised desk and recounting his story over a cup of ice-cold orange juice. Morgan sat opposite, and Crowley sat at his desk looking thoughtful.

Morgan considered her Tenctonese Lingua-phone course. "Gurdmeena - er, drug water?" she hazarded.

"That's what we called it," said Naytor, with a shrug. "We had no idea what it actually was - just a thin white sludge that caused intoxication when ingested."

Morgan frowned. "Not sour milk?"

"Probably not exactly. Something very similar, though," said Dom. "There were a dozen of us on the production line, basically just fishing out a few nasty things that floated in it."

"Nasty things?" said Morgan, who was vaguely aware that she was losing her usual interrogative talent, here.

"Some sort of swimming insect things," grimaced Dominic, remembering the evil eight-legged horrors he had to fish out of the slime. "Andarko knows what they were doing in there. It was our job to take them out and toss them into the recycler."

Morgan nodded warily. "And how does this fit into our investigations?"

Crowley sat up in his seat and adopted a deadly serious expression. "There were thirteen Cold Fire deaths on the Gruza, all in all," he said. "I've been checking with Morfran. Every last one of them occurred in the gurdmeena processing plant on level twenty-six."

"I knew three of them," said Dom. "They all died after stealing a mouthful of gurdmeena from the production stream. Within seconds."

"The Overseers told us that it was Cold Fire," he continued, "The gods destroying us for daring to pollute our bodies."

Morgan wore a look of blank horror.

"The Overseers also gave them special pills before they started work," added Crowley, darkly. "And they couldn't just pump the air full of Holy Gas and order the slaves not to drink the gurdmeena, since the Gas would pollute the stuff."

"Hmm," said Morgan.

"And there's one Overseer in particular that you remember from the plant?" added Crowley, prompting Naytor.

Dominic nodded.

★

"Through here, Mr Varque."

Jonah Varque ducked through the doorway of interview room three. He strode across the cigarette-scarred lino for a few paces, before taking in the contents of the room and slowing to a wary halt. He looked down at the faintly grinning faces of DIs Crowley and Morgan. Behind him, PC Naytor entered the dingy room and quietly closed the door.

"What is this?" said Varque, gesturing at the brace of empty chairs opposite the detectives. "Where's my client?"

Crowley's eyes rose to Jonah's somewhat testy visage.

"You are he," said the Tenctonese DI, who was smiling. "Sit down."

"What do y—"

"Take a seat, Varque," snapped Crowley. "We'd like to have a few words."

"This is preposterous," spat Varque, turning back to the door. He pushed Naytor out of the way. "You can't possibly—"

"We can, Kleezantsun," said Crowley, quietly.

Varque froze, his hand hovering motionlessly a few inches from the door handle. After a moment or two of quiescence, the duty brief regained his composure and span to face DI Crowley.

He gave a hollow laugh. "Kleezantsun'?" he said, derisively, "Whoever have you been talking to, Crowley?"

"Me," said Naytor, striding back into Varque's field of vision. "Rehgal. I used to work for you on the gurdmeena processing plant, deck twenty six." He smiled. "Remember?"

"No," lied Varque, firmly. He turned to Crowley. "Is this what you're charging me with, if charging's the right word for this farce? Being an Overseer on the word of some—" he gestured vaguely at Dominic, "—some plod?" Jonah gave a mocking sort of laugh. "The Gruza bill hasn't made it through the Commons yet, Crowley - you wouldn't be able to charge me for any alleged crimes aboard the slave ship, even if you could prove I was Kleezantsun'. You're clutching at straws, man."

"Quite right," said Crowley, deflating. He nodded to Morgan. "Charge him formally for whatever you can think of, take him away to a cell and we'll question him later."

Varque smiled very weakly indeed.

"We haven't got any free cells, I'm afraid, sir," said Morgan, in something of an intentional reading-from-a-script voice.

"Oh, haven't we?" said Crowley, in a similar tone. "Best put him in with another prisoner, then."

Morgan consulted a blank piece of paper. "Brian Damage in cell three?" Aside from a slight blanching of the irises and a contraction of the pupils, Varque did not react.

"Perfect," said Crowley. He frowned with sudden false realisation. "Oh, but wait - if we take Varque's watch off and happen to mention that we think he's an Overseer..."

Jonah's left hand twitched involuntarily. Beneath an expensive wristwatch, the faint markings of an imperfect tattoo removal were still just about visible. Crowley grinned darkly.

"Oh, of course," said Morgan, emotionlessly. "What with Damage being a suspected member of the ORS, and everything."

"The ORS?" asked Naytor, innocently.

"Oontsi Rof Sansol," said Crowley, happily, looking directly at Jonah. "Justice For Slaves." He laughed weakly. "After all, we wouldn't want him trying to kill our Mr. Varque, here, would we?"

Varque crossed the floor and descended into one of the battered chairs. He glared at Crowley. "All right, you win," he sneered. "What's all this about?"

David nodded to Naytor, who silently left the interview room, closing the door behind him. Crowley lifted a thick beige folder from the corner of the desk, and removed a bundle of documents. He slid them across to Varque. Top of the pile were a handful of glossy black-and-white photographs, grimly depicting the corpses of de Fey, Bearer and Wheel from various dramatic angles.

"Ring any bells?"

"None," said Varque, with an air of finality, and pushed the papers back across.

Crowley sighed wearily. "Don't waste our time, Varque," he said. "Cold Fire deaths. Wrath of the gods for gurdmeena drinkers. Remember?"

Varque shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Cooperate and we'll forget we ever had this conversation," said Crowley. "Keep up this rubbish and we really will throw you in a cell with that nice Mr. Damage." He gave Jonah a dark stare, and pushed the documents back across the desk.

"Alright, yes," said Varque. "Cold Fire deaths. We had a few at the processing plant. That's all I can tell you. I don't know any more than you do, Crowley."

"But what caused them?" said Morgan.

Varque blinked. "The wrath of Zel," he said, simply.

Crowley leaned back in his chair and sighed. "Yes, yes, very amusing," he said. "Now what really, actually, chemically caused them, Varque?"

"I haven't the faintest idea how the gods work on a molecular level, Crowley," shrugged the Overseer.

"It wouldn't have been those little pills you gave to the workers before they started their shift, then?" asked David, with a cruel air of sarcasm.

Varque looked lost for a moment. "The antibiotics?" he said, warily. "No, they were just to protect against the toxins of the swimming insects. Whatever made you think it was those?"

"What the hell else could it possibly have been?" said the Newcomer detective.

"The wrath of Zel," said Varque, again. A staunch Zelian since the day of his birth, he genuinely, honestly believed this to be the case. "This is obviously what's been happening to your victims here," he added, gesturing to the autopsy shots. "Zel thinks we should be taught the error of our ways. He has made an example of these three."

Atheist Crowley glowered for a while. It was broken by a blink which suggested the arrival of a new and potentially promising line of enquiry.

"These antibiotics - who supplied them?" he asked.

Varque looked at him blankly for a moment. "One of the pharmaceutical laboratories, of course."

"Which one?"

Varque shook his head slightly. "I don't remember."

"Was it deck nineteen?" hissed Crowley, leaning over the desk urgently.

Jonah's brow creased for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I believe it was."

Crowley stood up. "The bastard."

"Who?" said Morgan, as Crowley made for the door.

"Anglia," called the DI, his voice echoing down the corridor. "Ford bloody Anglia."

★

A fist rapped on the plywood front door of 58 Ryland Street. Police Constable Naytor and Detective Constable Smith stood on the scuffed doorstep, the latter peering between a crack in the front window's crude planking.

"He's coming to the door," said Smith, who could hear footsteps within the house. Naytor nodded.

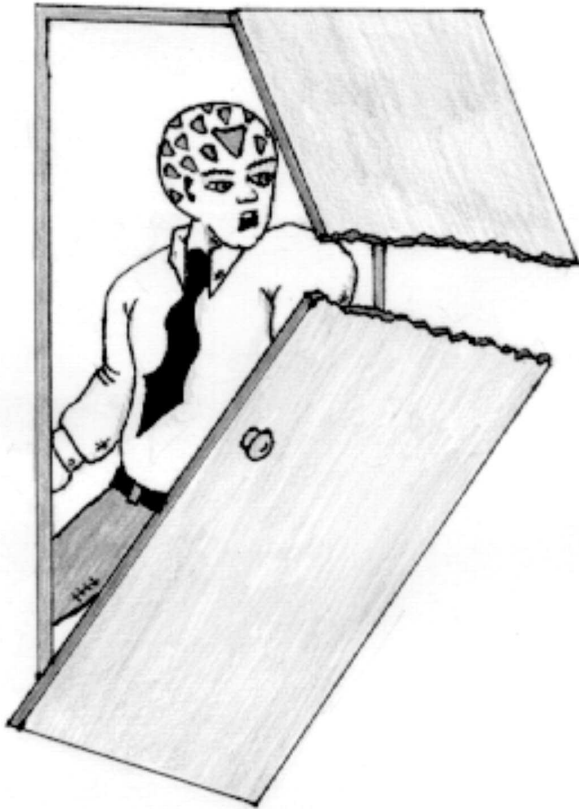
The front door opened a crack, and the pale visage of Ford Anglia regarded his visitors. It looked

mildly alarmed at Dominic's police uniform. "What do you want?" said Ford.

"A look around your house, if you'd be so kind, sir," said Naytor. He produced a search warrant from inside his jacket and passed it through the gap in the door to Anglia. Ford briefly read the document, and nodded. "Okay, hold on, I'll just take the chain off."

The door clicked shut, and there was the sound of scratching metal as Ford fiddled with the security chain.

This was followed by the unmistakable and rather disheartening sound of carefully retreating footsteps.



"Oh dear," sighed Dominic Naytor. He looked at his partner. "Shall you, or shall I?" Jayne Smith shrugged and waved him at the door. He police constable took a few steps back along the weed-strangled path, and sprinted shoulder-first at the front door. He connected dead-on with an impressive crash, and the hinges burst clean out of the door-frame in a shower of sawdust. The plywood door fell through onto the carpet, and Dominic bounded over it into the house.

He stood in the hallway for a moment, looking to see where Anglia had run to. There was a crash from the upstairs landing. Dominic bounded athletically up the staircase. DC Jayne Smith followed him up.

"Police!" called Naytor, in his best police-shouting voice. "Hold it right there, Anglia!" Dominic arrived on the landing just in time to see a bedroom door slam. He kicked it open without a thought. And froze momentarily when he caught sight of the room's contents.

If Doctor Frankenstein had been living on state benefit in a run-down Birmingham suburb, his laboratory would probably have looked something like this. Crammed into the tiny back bedroom was a

bewildering collection of scientific equipment, all of it looking distinctly second-hand. Ill-matched electronic devices were strung together with varying styles of cable. Grimy lengths of glass piping connected chipped test tubes and retorts, and a faltering fluorescent light illuminated the room, the back window having been determinedly boarded up.

The unmistakable smell of sour milk hung heavily in the stale air of the bedroom. Three dozen or so bottles of various brands were stacked in the far corner.

As Dominic stood there, a young linnaum turned her attention from a rack of test-tubes on a dressing table. She clutched a handful of orange powder in one hand, and a large beaker of thick white liquid in the other. And wore a slightly crazed smile worthy of any mad scientist.

"Sorry to resort to cliché, officer," said Anne Algesic, "But if you step any nearer I'll be forced to throw these at you." She gave another unhinged smile. "They're flammable when mixed." A rather nervous looking Ford Anglia stepped behind her. He stared down at the beaker, then up at Naytor.

"She's right," he said.

Jayne slowed to a wary halt on the stairway. Behind his back, Dominic was making urgent "back away" gestures with a hidden hand. She silently made her way back down the stairs.

"Lie down on the floor," suggested Algesic firmly. Carefully, Naytor dropped to his knees, and slowly laid his body flat on the dusty floorboards. Anne took a handful of orange powder and threw it over the prone officer.

"Now give me your radio."

★

"He was working for Damos Pharmaceuticals back in 1994," said Crowley, as Morgan's car sped towards the domicile of Mr Ford Anglia. "Happily using his spare time and laboratory equipment to manufacture sjabroka, along with unknown accomplices. Andrew Christ was taking the stuff and distributing it via his network of dealers, until we, er, put a stop to it in the May of '95."

Morgan nodded to herself. She had the feeling that Crowley was launching into one of his soliloquys, here. Best to leave him to it.

"As it turned out, Anglia had been doing much the same thing aboard the slave ship," continued David, "Manufacturing sjabroka in one of the pharmaceutical labs, for distribution by Christ. With a good twenty years of experience behind him, he knew precisely what he was doing."

Morgan's Fiat swerved around a bus and turned off down a side road on its way to Ryland Street.

"So presumably he's doing the same with the Cold Fire drug?" said Jennifer. "Using his knowledge from its manufacture aboard the ship to duplicate it here in Birmingham?"

"I'd guess so," said Crowley. "Apparently he got his old job back at Damos - there are precious few Tenctonese chemists on the planet. But the question is how he's getting people to take the drug." He tapped distractedly at the dashboard. "No common medication between the victims, you say?"

"None that we know of," said Morgan. "No prescribed drugs, at any rate."

The two detectives drove on in thoughtful silence, but for the rather static-ridden piece of classical music that the stereo was just about picking up. Suddenly, Morgan chose to apply the brakes, and the car screeched to a halt. Crowley's overlarge skull nearly bounced off of the windscreen. He turned to face his partner, and caught her worried expression.

"Colds," said Morgan, in a quiet voice, realising that Crowley hadn't been told this yet. "All the Cold Fire victims had colds."

Eyes wide and knowing exactly what she was thinking, Crowley reached into his shirt pocket. From it, he removed a slightly crumpled cardboard box, bearing a silhouetted Tenctonese head and the word "Ecrudex" in large green letters. David flipped it over and scanned the writing on its reverse.

"Manufactured by Diamos Pharmaceuticals, Birmingham."

★

Keith Darkwood frowned at the television set from his uncomfortable NHS hospital bed. He'd been frowning steadily at the broadcast for the past minute or two. A smartly-dressed Newcomer doctor was clutching a box of Ecrudex and saying urgent-sounding Tenctonese words, few of which meant anything to the hospitalised DS.

"I still don't understand this advert," he commented to the patient in the next bed. Keith waggled his unbandaged left arm at the television screen. His other arm had been badly hit by some flaming component of the exploding Volvo engine, and was bound up with various liquid-filled tubes snaking to and from it.

"It isn't an advert," said the man in plaster, turning his head to face the complaining detective. "It's an urgent statement requiring all of the pills to be returned to their place of purchase."

"Oh," said Keith, weakly. He slumped back into his pillows a bit. "That'd be it, then."

★

Ford Anglia regarded Anne Algesic with a certain wariness. In the past few minutes, she seemed to be gradually losing her grip on things. He'd never seen her like this before - not once in the twenty years he'd worked with her on the ship.

Anne looked back over her shoulder, directly at Ford. "Destroy the equipment," she said. Her irises glistened a dark, dark shade of black. "Destroy it all."

"What?" said Ford. He nearly followed up with "Are you mad?", but stopped himself just in time. "Is that wise?" was his chosen alternative response.

"It must all be destroyed," she insisted. For a moment, her stygian pupils gazed into middle-distance. "Evidence," she added. "It must be burned. All of it."

Algesic looked down at Naytor, who was still managing to look fairly bold and purposeful despite lying face-down on the floor. Anne gave an unmistakably evil smile, and stepped over him into the corridor.

Ford had taken a screwdriver to a couple of large white plastic bags. Tiny orange crystals were hissing out through the jagged holes, piling into tiny dunes on the grubby floorboards. Anglia moved a few bottles about, here and there. They were full of branded sour milk, kindly taken from the local pubs by Robert Erbank and his associates.

"Okay, if we throw something to kn—" began Ford, turning to face Anne. He stopped. She was still clutching a large glass beaker of sour milk, and half a handful of orange powder. And wearing a very deranged smile.

"Er, Anne?" said Ford carefully.

"All evidence must be burned," she said, in a disturbingly calm and level voice. "Lie down on the floor, Ford."

★

The door to 58 Ryland Street was quite definitely open. It lay on the front carpet bearing two sets of muddy footprints. Crowley stepped gingerly over it, planting a foot very carefully onto the carpet. At the top of the staircase, Anne Algesic had her back to him, and was conversing with Anglia. DC Smith stood out by Morgan's parked car, keeping an eye on the crumbling terraced house. Morgan herself stood outside the front door, idly swinging her car's miniature fire extinguisher and regarding Crowley's progress.

He tiptoed silently to the foot of the staircase, and tilted his head to peer up at Algesic. Her beaker of sour milk glinted in the light of the bedroom laboratory's dying fluorescent bulb.

David smiled. His hand reached into his shirt pocket.

★

Ford had grudgingly dropped to his knees, but was hesitant about flattening himself any further.

"Are you sure about this, Anne? Without the blueprints," he said, nodding to a box of floppy disks sitting on a dusty shelf, "I'd be the only one with sufficient knowledge to recreate the drug. And I'm certainly the only one who'd be able to get it put into the Ecrudex."

Algesic's smile hadn't faltered yet, and her irises had been darkening further during the past few seconds. "I know," she said. She lifted the beaker of sour milk to her lips and took a swig. Ford blinked at this rather blatant breach of Maolen's Third Precept.

"Lie down, Ford," she said, wiping the brew from her upper lip with - wisely - the hand holding the beaker. "On the floor," she added, for clarity.

"But if you—" said Ford, desperation creeping in.

Anne felt something brush against her hand, and there was a dull plop from the beaker of sour milk. She looked down. A bubble rose to the surface and popped. An inch or two beneath, a single Ecrudex pill was slowly making its way to the bottom of the glass. It took a couple of seconds for the slightly crumpled coating to dissolve.

Anne Algesic's right hand exploded in a burst of cold fire.

★

Doctor Alexander Pike flicked off his pocket torch. The device ceased shining its sharp white light into the now-mauve left iris of Anne Algesic, and the instrument vanished into one of the doctor's clean white pockets. As Pike let go of Anne's eyelid, it gently closed.

"She'll be fine in a few days," he said, with a shrug. "She's lost her hand, of course, and has a few minor burns and glass wounds to her right leg and torso, but she should be well enough to be interviewed."

Anne was lying in a hospital bed of Birmingham General's Newcomer ward, looking distinctly worse for wear. Morgan had managed to extinguish her flaming clothes fairly quickly, with the added benefit of the carbon dioxide's anaesthetic qualities, but she'd been burned pretty badly. Pumped full of sedatives, Anne Algesic was sleeping, dreaming uneasy dreams of fire and demons.

Sat glumly in the next bed was Ford Anglia, who'd caught a bit of glass shrapnel to the skull and had managed to burn his legs rather nastily. His head was bandaged, and he was idly flicking through a magazine.

Further down the ward, PC Dominic Naytor was sat up in bed watching television. On the screen, a couple of fire engines were parked in the gutted remnants of 58 Ryland Street. Stumbling to escape, Ford had knocked a bottle of milk over, spilling the sour contents over a slashed bag of orange powder. It had exploded instantly, scattering flaming debris all over the room. The house had been pretty much consumed by fire by the time that the fire brigade chose to show up.

Dominic rubbed a tiny scar on his forehead. He'd already been half-way down the staircase by the time Ford had spilt the milk, and was suffering from nothing more than minor concussion. He'd be back on duty in the morning.

The television report cut to a blank-looking warehouse on an anonymous Birmingham industrial estate. A jagged sign above the double-doors read "Diamos Pharmaceuticals", and heavy crates were being steadily carried out to waiting lorries. People in lab coats wandered about looking distressed.

"Thanks for your time, doctor," said Morgan, turning from Anne's bed and heading for the corridor. Crowley followed her, and Pike returned to his duties.

"Erbank and Damage have apparently confessed to the sour milk thefts," said Crowley, having spoken to Black, "They were giving a few bottles to Anglia and Algesic for their research, and just dumping the rest in the canal. We suspect Varque was masterminding it, but without evidence or admission we can't prove an awful lot."

Morgan nodded thoughtfully. "And the third person in the car?"

"Their accomplice," said Crowley, "We're guessing that she took a sip of sour milk from one of the crates they had in the back, and went up in flames. Erbank claims that her name was—" Crowley half-smiled weakly. "Bonnie Fire. We're still checking that one."

The two detectives walked on in grim silence.

"Oh, did I ever tell you de Fey's first name?" said David.



Morgan looked intrigued. "No."

He didn't tell her then, either, because he managed to collide head-on with DC Jayne Smith. She was striding down the corridor in the opposite direction, bearing a huge bunch of flowers.

"Sorry, sir," she said, looking out from behind the colourful array of stems and petals. There were a few beautiful alien flowers poking from between their local counterparts, bred from seed cultures salvaged from the Gruza.

"Flowers?" said Crowley, raising a bald eyebrow. "You shouldn't have," he added, with theatrically false gratitude.

Smith smiled prettily. "They're for our wounded officer," she explained. "Thought he might appreciate it."

"Ah," said David. He stood aside, and motioned for Jayne to pass along the corridor.

As she strode onwards, Morgan and Crowley headed for the front doors, returning to investigate

whatever crimes the early evening held for them.

In a dark and near-empty ward, a lone figure looked out from the blackness, watching with surprise as the young Tenctonese officer walked directly towards him. Flowers? He smiled. What a nice thought. Especially after Crowley and Morgan didn't bother visiting him.

Jayne Smith continued to walk towards the darkened ward, her shoes clicking rhythmically on the brittle linoleum. Flowers. This was a turn up for the books, and no mistake. The injured policeman sat up in bed and tugged his dressing gown into place. He fumbled for the bedside light, and clicked it on.

Half way down the corridor, Jayne turned off to the left and entered the Newcomer ward instead.

"Oh," said Darkwood, dismally. He reached out with his only working arm. With a click, Keith's world was plunged back into darkness.

Kosh Encounters (2)

by A & K



*It's dethpicable - can't a duck have a shower in peace?
Where's the soap gone?*

Letters of Comment

Judith Proctor, Dorset, England

Zine arrived today. First impressions look good. ... I'll give you a final decision [about agenting it] when I've finished reading it, but I think the answer is very likely to be yes. The layout and general production are excellent.

[Obviously, she did say yes - after pointing out some errors in *Not Dead But Sleeping*! She posted a nice review to the *Blake's 7* mailing list too. — ed.]

Kevan Davis, Worcestershire, U.K.

The zine dropped onto my doormat last week, and I must say I was deeply impressed with it all. A nice lot of material (your *Blake's 7/Highlander* crossover was excellent, and I look forward to seeing the sequels), and splendid artwork, all expertly put together. Top notch. If I don't manage to pen *Cold Fire* before the next issue is out, I'll be throwing coinage at your UK distributor.

[Regarding the (lack of) illustrations in *Not Dead But Sleeping*] Not to worry. I thought your reworked picture of Calder was excellent; certainly an inspirational thing for my future scribbles.

Nice to see all the plot errors and typos waiting for publication before becoming apparent to me, as well. Kudos to you for spotting the Greenacre/Greenwood nonsense, but I was more than a little horrified to see Morgan speaking of "Malton" at one point (the story was originally set in the mythical city of Malton, but I changed it to Birmingham after a while), and to see Black suddenly getting a gun during one sentence... Such is often the way of things. Never mind.

Enjoyed it thoroughly.

JJ Adamson, South Australia

Hello - and first, my profound apologies for the delay in getting back to you. When the zines arrived, I wanted to sit down and write straight back, letting you know how beautiful *Refractions #1* looks!... Better late than never, here I am!

As I said, the zine *looks* gorgeous, even before one sits down to read. I was very impressed with all of it, from the layout (that's Mac isn't it??) to the art, and most definitely the stories! My favourite piece? Has to be *Winning Is The Only Safety*, no doubt about it. Kudos are in order! I look very much

to the continuation... think of this! *Blake's 7* and *Highlander* in the same story! Be still my beating heart. Best piece of art? I think, the Avon on p 16. That hit the spot for me! *Not Dead But Sleeping* was a little 'wasted' on me, because I never saw *Alien Nation*, and the same applies to *Babylon 5*. But the B7 and *Highlander* material more than made up for this. I love *Highlander*. Okay, sure, the show has its flaws. But then again, nothing is perfect and *Highlander* has the merit of being different, setting off to be original, and sticking to that determination!

Many thanks for a wonderful zine! I look forward eagerly to your next issue, and once again, my sincere apologies for the delay in responding to you. My life has been a soap opera from hell, since about three days before *Refractions* arrived, and is only now getting back onto something remotely like an even keel!

[Actually, no, the zine is not done on a Mac, it is done on a breezy little IBM compatible PC running MS-Publisher in MS-Windows with a coupla hundred true-type fonts. The cover logo was done in Corell Draw, as well as part of the page- footers. Scanning courtesy of an SP Color 6000 scanner and Micrografx Picture Publisher. And unfortunately, the next part of *Winning Is The Only Safety* had to be put off until next issue. It is still unfinished, alas. — ed.]

Marina Bailey, Johannesburg, South Africa

Yes, it [*Refractions #1*] got here early last week. Thanks so much. I was actually waiting to email you until I had read it, but I've been so busy the last couple of weeks that I haven't had a chance to do *anything* fan-related (except read email!). But it's sitting here on the computer patiently. <smile>

[Not much of a comment, but she never did get back to me about the zine. Our correspondence turned to other matters - like *Highlander* <grin>. — ed.]

Isoline Sanderson, USA

Yes I did [get my copy of #1 okay] - and it looks very nice! I *loved* the B5 story in it (had never read that one), but haven't really been able to read the rest of it. (see above re: life...) Thank you kindly!

[No, I'm not just printing the good letters - these are all I got! Apathy strikes again. The only editing here was to cut out personal non-LoC stuff. Thanks for those people who *did* comment. — ed.]

Astrogation Log

Once again, the place where you orient yourself if you are lost while reading the pieces in this issue, where I tell you a bit about where and when they are set.

What's in a Word? is a *Babylon 5* story, set early third season, but it doesn't contain spoilers, okay?

Kosh Encounters #1 & #2 explores the question - what is Kosh really hiding under his encounter suit?

Faith Manages? is a *Babylon 5* poem, set in an as-yet-unknown future, showing Delenn's reaction if Sheridan died in the Great War. No details, just emotions. But it won't make much sense if you haven't seen the second-season episodes *Confessions & Lamentations* or *Comes The Inquisitor*.

Irregularity is set somewhere early in the first season of *Blake's 7*, and early in the partnership of *Sapphire & Steel*.

Coda is a coda to **Irregularity**: what happened next - or in four years time, anyway. Time is such a flexible thing to time-travellers.

Resolution is a *Blake's 7* poem told first from the point of view of Blake, early on, and then from Avon, early fourth season.

On The Way To The Midnight Sun is set a number of years after (as related in *Ladyhawke*) Isabeau of Anjou, and Etienne of Navarre, broke the curse laid upon them by the wicked Bishop of Aquila, that Isabeau would be a hawk by day, and Navarre would

be a wolf by night, and never would they be in their human forms together, until there was a night without a day, and a day without a night.

Haiku For Katana is just that - a poem about a sword, inspired by *Highlander*.

Steele Blades is a *Remington Steele/Highlander* crossover, set soon before the start of the *Highlander* series and just after *Altared Steele* in season two of *Remington Steele*. It also explains why Steele and Laura managed to survive so many incidents during the series.

The Long Sleep is a *UFO* poem, relating to the incidents of the episode of the same name.

Cold Fire is set in the *Alien Nation* universe, where a group of alien slaves, the Tenctonese, crash-landed their space-ship in California a number of years ago. Apart from the setting, it has nothing in common with the TV series, since it follows a different set of characters altogether, in England, rather than the States. This is the second story in a series. The first story, **Not Dead But Sleeping**, appeared in *Refractions #1*. Not that you need to have read it to understand this one.

Symbiosis is a *Blake's 7* poem, set during *Sarcophagus*, from the point of view of the Alien, addressing Cally.

Mirror Truths is a poem, yes, that's true. And I'm calling it a *Babylon 5* poem because it was inspired by *Babylon 5*. So there.

Mirror Truths

Love.	Love of family.	Family of love.	Love.
Pain.	Pain of defeat.	Defeat of pain.	Pain.
Fear.	Fear of loss.	Loss of fear.	Fear.
Death.	Death of innocence.	Innocence of death.	Death.
Life.	Life of friends.	Friends of life.	Life.
These things drive us forward.		These things hold us close.	

If we let them.

(Mary Richards)

